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Introduction: populism & its critics

by Roger Kimball

An introduction to "Populism & its critics," a conference organized jointly by The New Criterion and London's Social Affairs Unit.

I doubt that any political term has occasioned more confusion over the last few years than "populism." In many ways, it is a word in search of a definition. In this sense, "populism" is fielded as was the term "fascism" according to George Orwell. Anything or anyone you don't like can be effectively impugned if you can deploy the F word and get it to stick. It's the same with "populism." It functions largely as a handy negative epithet, a rhetorical hand grenade, whose very lack of semantic content is one of its chief attractions. Toss the word into a discussion and, bang! the discussion is over. But what does the word mean? The dictionary, and the history books, have pointers. But these days ninety-nine times of a hundred it means little more than "I don't like this person or this policy." Connoisseurs of cant will have noticed that the term "racism" has a similar all-purpose, content-free aura of malignity, but exploring that malodorous development is a topic for another day.

"Populism" functions largely as a handy negative epithet.

A first answer to the question "How should conservatives respond to the populist challenge?"—the burden of the conference that inspired the following essays—is a train-stopping "that depends." It depends to a large extent not only on what we mean by "populism" but also on what we mean by "conservatives," which latter term, I will note in passing, is not necessarily synonymous with Republicans in this country or with Tories in Great Britain.

Again, it is often said that "populism" is "anti- elitist," but when it comes to phenomena like Brexit or the election of Donald Trump, I am not sure that the effective contrast is between elites, on the one hand, and us common folk, on the other. Often, I believe, the putative "elites" turn out to be neither "elite" nor elevated, merely to be possessed, through no virtue of their own, of an abundance of state power.

The following essays conjure with the phenomenon—or, to put it more accurately, with the phenomena, plural—of populism from a variety of perspectives. Some, like George H. Nash's,

strike a sustained admonitory chord: Is populism at bottom a quest for security that is all too willing to jettison freedom? Is it inherently "conformist" and "collectivizing"? Is it fired by precisely the sort of unbridled passions that the Founders warned against in their condemnations of "faction" and unalloyed democracy (democracies tending to be, wrote Madison, "as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths")?

Others sound a more allegro note. James Piereson, for example, argues that "there is a tendency now to exaggerate the threat posed by populism to the constitutional order and to regard the populist impulse as something new when in fact it is embedded in any system of popular government." The system of representation and divided power devised by the Founders was intended, and has in fact served, to soften and channel popular passions into responsible political institutions. "Modern liberal systems," Piereson observes, "were designed or have evolved to check populist movements and to redirect them into established political channels where they are unlikely to do lasting damage." Look around: isn't that happening right before our eyes?

Many discussions of populism in contemporary America begin by dilating on the bitter, hyper-partisan climate that characterizes so much of our political and social life today. It is indeed easy to find examples of that hostility, especially in the elite redoubts of the university and the media. But as Andrew C. McCarthy notes, the idea that we are a deeply divided country misstates the reality. "What we are," he argues, "is an intensely divided country," which is not quite the same thing:

> To say that America is "deeply" divided implies what the left-leaning media would have us believe, namely, that the likes of Antifa and such politicians as Bernie Sanders (the self-proclaimed socialist who nearly bested Hillary Clinton for the Democratic presidential nomination) are representative of what roughly half the country thinks.
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> It is simply not true.

As Jeremy Black observes, the question of populism is inseparable from "longstanding debates, philosophical, political, and literary, about the values of democracy and democratization." That discussion, Black notes, "goes back to the Classical world, more particularly to the constitution and politics of Athens and Rome." This is indisputably true. When it comes to understanding populism in the contemporary world, however, history can be as confusing as it is illuminating, because many of the standard historical examples one encounters have but a tenuous connection with what is today denominated as "populist." Most surveys of the subject start with Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, the Roman Tribunes who in the late Republic agitated for land reform and grain allotments for the poor. They also introduced mob violence to the metabolism of Roman political life and were, a decade apart, murdered, in the case of Tiberius, or driven to suicide, in the case of his brother, by their patrician opponents.

What lessons do the Gracchi brothers or later Roman populists like Gaius Marius or Julius Caesar have to teach us about the signal populist movements of our own day? Very little, I would say, at least in countries with robust republican institutions, and I would extend that epistemic stinginess

to more modern allotropes like Huey Long and Father Coughlin, two other figures who make at least cameo appearances whenever populism is the topic du jour.

That said, Douglas Carswell usefully points out how often throughout history the concentration of power in the hands of an oligarchy—official or merely de facto—has led to a "populist backlash."

> On both sides of the Atlantic, a vast sprawling array of officialdom has sprung up. Funded by tomorrow's taxpayer, this administrative state presides over two continent-wide federations, remote technocrats utterly detached from the concerns of millions of ordinary Americans and Europeans.
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> Public policy is increasingly made by officials who are out of touch with the public. Perhaps the only thing that is surprising is that anyone should be surprised at how angry and alienated the public has become.

Daniel Johnson furnishes a vivid example of what happens when this angry and alienated cohort wakes up. In Germany, the populist party called Alternative for Germany "stormed into the Bundestag" in order to advance their program of "controlling the borders and halting the 'Islamization' of Germany." This, Johnson writes, was "a direct response to Mrs. Merkel's cavalier disregard for the ordinary people who have paid the price for her open-door policy" that has brought millions of Islamic refugees from Africa and the Middle East to Germany. Johnson also makes the point that the protest in Germany has been widely misunderstood elsewhere, especially in America, where many "have swallowed the line of the German Far Left, that the new party and its supporters are 'Nazis' who should be excluded from the democratic process." On the contrary, "most of the six million who voted for the Alternative for Germany were simply frustrated by the refusal of bigwigs in Berlin to listen to their concerns."

My own feeling is that most contemporary examples of what are called "populist" movements are at bottom movements to force the question: "Who rules?" Jeremy Black is doubtless correct that much of what we call "populist" today is at least in part a coefficient of upheavals wrought by technological displacement and homely facts of population change. Behind those realities, however, I would suggest that "populism" is primarily about what I have elsewhere called the location of sovereignty. For one thing, the question of sovereignty, of "Who governs?" stands behind the rebellion against the political correctness and moral meddlesomeness that are such conspicuous and disfiguring features of our increasingly bureaucratic society. The smothering, Tocquevillian blanket of regulatory excess has had a wide range of practical and economic effects, stifling entrepreneurship and making any sort of productive innovation difficult.

In *The Road to Serfdom*, Friedrich Hayek said that one of the "main points" of his argument concerned "the psychological change," the "alteration of the character of the people," that extensive government control brought in its wake. The alteration involves a process of softening, enervation, infantilization even: an exchange of the challenges of liberty and self-reliance—the challenges, that is to say, of adulthood—for the coddling pleasures of dependence. Max Weber spoke in this context of *Ordnungsmenschen*, men who had become increasingly dependent on an

order imposed upon them from above. Breaking with that drift becomes more and more difficult the more habituated to dependence a people becomes. In this sense, what has been described as a populist upsurge against political correctness is simply a reassertion of independence, a reclamation of what turns out to be a most uncommon virtue, common sense.

The issue of sovereignty also stands behind the debate over immigration. Is any issue more central to the question "Who governs?" than who gets to decide where to draw a nation's borders and how a country defines its first person plural: the "We" that makes us who we are as a people? Throughout his campaign, Donald Trump thrilled his populist supporters by promising to enforce America's immigration laws, to end so-called "sanctuary cities," which advertise themselves as safe havens for illegal aliens (though of course they do not call them "illegal aliens"), and to sharpen vetting procedures for people wishing to immigrate to America from countries known as sponsors of terrorism.

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The issue of sovereignty also stands behind the debates over the relative advantages and moral weather of "globalism" vs. "nationalism" as well as the correlative economic issues of underemployment and wage stagnation. In Federalist 10, Madison warned against the schemes of "theoretic" politicians. "Globalism" may sound attractive in the abstract. But the spirit of local control tempers the cosmopolitan project of a borderless world with a recognition that the nation state has been the best guarantor not only of sovereignty but also of broadly shared prosperity. What we might call the ideology of free trade—the globalist aspiration to transcend the impediments of national identity and control—is an abstraction that principally benefits its architects.

Behind the various moods and movements that have been described as "populist" is a growing recognition that the goals of the administrative state are inimical to freedom. "Populist," indeed, is one word for those phenomena. An affirmation of sovereignty, underwritten by a passion for freedom, is another, possibly more accurate, phrase. If that is correct, then I'd say that conservatives ought to respond to the "populist challenge" by embracing it wholeheartedly.

Notes

"Populism & Its Critics: How Conservatives Should Respond to the Populist Challenge," a conference organized jointly by *The New Criterion* and London's Social Affairs Unit, took place on Friday, September 29, 2017, in New York City. Participants were David Azerrad, Jeremy Black, Chris Buskirk, Douglas Carswell, Michael Gleba, Philip Hamburger, Daniel Johnson, Roger Kimball, Andrew C. McCarthy, Christopher

Montgomery, Michael Mosbacher, George H. Nash, and James Piereson. Discussion revolved around earlier versions of the essays presented in this special section.

Roger Kimball is Editor and Publisher of *The New Criterion* and President and Publisher of Encounter Books. His latest books include *The Critical Temper: Interventions from* The New Criterion *at 40* (Encounter Books) and *Where Next? Western Civilization at the Crossroads* (Encounter Books).

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