

Populism's bad guys

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August 11, 2011



This week's buzz piece is Drew Westen's [long-form complaint](#) about Obama's lackluster performance as a reformer in the mold of the Roosevelts. There's a lot there, not all of it [entirely persuasive](#) or even [accurate](#), but one of the main takeaways is this:

The president is a brilliant and moving speaker, but his stories virtually always lack one element: the villain who caused the problem, who is always left out, described in impersonal terms, or described in passive voice, as if the cause of others' misery has no agency and hence no culpability.

In other words, Obama's rhetoric lacks populist indignation. Westen doesn't actually use the word "populist," perhaps because it rivals "[evangelical](#)" for the honor of thorniest term in the language. There is currently a libertarian party in the U.S. known as [the Populists](#); there was once [a less marginal one](#) with more progressive aims. Small-"p" populism usually refers not to specific ideology but to a general framework: taking the side of the many against the elite few.

Of

late, the most obvious example is the Tea Party, which equates elitism with big government. But the Tea Party's success in Wisconsin has led to [an opposing populist message](#) there as well, in the buildup to Tuesday's [recall elections](#) (which had [mixed results](#)). Unlike Obama, Wisconsin Democrats have not been shy about giving the bad guy a name.

But

does populist rhetoric crudely paint individuals as good guys and bad guys? It can. This can be a distraction--recall the [to-do](#) about the AIG executive bonuses, which amounted to an especially stinky drop in our bucket of financial slop.

More

importantly, singling out individuals as greedy or cruel or otherwise immoral misses the point. Our country and its non-rich masses are struggling under systemic, structural injustice--the problem is so much bigger than bad apples in positions of power. As Westen says, Obama would do well to name the villains in the story he tells the American people. But the villains aren't individuals; they're [powers and principalities](#).

As

the Wisconsin situation reveals, populist rhetoric can be made to serve even flatly conflicting goals. But true economic populism--being on the side of the poor against the powers of injustice and inequality--should be a primary norm for Christian thinking about politics. Such a commitment need not be partisan. Serious advocates for the poor will disagree--sometimes starkly--about what course of action or party or candidate is best.

My

rule of thumb, however, is to be suspicious of any proposal that claims to help the poor but clearly pursues this not as a primary goal but as a welcome byproduct of what is clearly its main thrust: helping the rich.

Broadly

speaking, conservatives don't have a corner on this bizarro-world populism any more than liberals do on actually helping the poor. But the current crop of

congressional Republicans has made its pro-rich bottom line pretty clear. All the talk of GOP intransigence on tax increases isn't quite right: while they've insisted that the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy be extended, they're [opposed](#) to a similar extension of the payroll tax cut, which is aimed at working people. An antitax purist would favor both cuts.

Of course, not everything is a zero-sum game between the rich and poor. There may be specific circumstances in which a rising tide indeed lifts all boats rather than swamping the small ones stuck on the shore. But there's little evidence that this is true as a rule--while there's much evidence of our country's [staggering inequality](#) and its ill effects.

Politicians

and organizers have often dismissed economic populism as a strategy because it works against the aspirational quality of American class dynamics: the poor don't want to join a poor people's movement; they want to not be poor anymore. But the rich are so rich now that it's hard to even imagine their lives, much less aspire to them. Meanwhile, many of the rungs on the ladder of economic mobility have rusted away.

We

are past due for true populist reform, but it need not be based on an us-vs.-them division of individual Americans. It should be based on a narrative that lifts up the many while naming the villain: not the rich themselves but a broken and sinful system that has long favored their interests over everyone else's.