Populist fever: Anger at the democratic deficit

by Robert Westbrook in the June 8, 2016 issue

Source photo © Tomwang112

The presidential campaign has stirred up primal emotions. Violent rhetoric has provoked violent physical confrontations. We hear much talk of “populist” fury.

Populist fury is no stranger to American politics and mass culture. Travis Bickle, the psychopathic protagonist and thwarted assassin in director Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976), played by Robert De Niro, would be 66 this year. One can well imagine him as John McGraw, the elderly man who threw a vicious elbow at the head of a black protester at a Donald Trump rally in North Carolina in March. McGraw later remarked that should his victim appear again, “we might have to kill him.”

Bickle—a lonely, angry, racist, white working-class young man—is the sort of American, we are told, who is most likely to be found today in Trump’s camp, and Trump is also said by many to be a populist. But so too is Bernie Sanders, whom Trump has blamed for the protests to which McGraw took vicious exception. And one should not in the current climate discount the possibility that the Trump candidacy might incite to violence a now ostensibly mild-mannered “populist” who “feels the

Bern.” So who is the genuine populist, Trump or Sanders? And who is the pretender?

These are not, I’m afraid, very helpful questions. Those most eager to ask and answer them are historians of the only brand of American populism to earn a capital P, the agrarian revolt of the late 1880s and early 1890s that spawned the short-lived People’s Party. For such historians, eager to protect their left-wing subjects from unseemly associations with right-wing firebrands such as George Wallace, Pat Buchanan, and Trump, *conservative populism* is an oxymoron, one they have struggled to remove from the American political lexicon.

A case in point is a recent article in the *American Historian* (February) by Charles Postel, arguably the leading historian of Populism. Postel points out, convincingly, that Sanders’s democratic socialism has considerable affinity with the Populism of the 1890s, while Trump’s aggrieved nationalism has little at all (though he might have noted that many Populists did share in the widespread Anglophobia and anti-Semitism of their time). The Populists “represented a powerful movement against corporate power that demanded solutions to the Gilded Age crisis of inequality. By the measure of this historical legacy, Bernie Sanders looks very much like a populist for the ‘Second Gilded Age,’ both in his diagnosis of and solutions to society’s ills.”

Like Sanders, the Populists, whose constituency was largely agrarian, denounced profound economic inequality that was transforming the nation into a society of “tramps and millionaires.” And they attacked the baleful threat of the moneyed classes to truly representative democracy. They pressed for a progressive income tax, public control and regulation of banking, railroad transport, and currency reform. As Postel suggests, Sanders’s thinking bears a particularly striking resemblance to that of Henry Demarest Lloyd, the radical Chicago journalist who ran for Congress on the Populist ticket in 1894. The title of Lloyd’s best-selling attack on corporate power, *Wealth against Commonwealth* (1894), might well serve as a shorthand expression for the animus driving Sanders’s campaign.

Trump, on the other hand, “with his gold-plated jets and mansions, looks very much like the type of plutocrat the Populists held responsible for the injustices and inequities of their time,” observes Postel. Trump does have historical precursors, Postel says, but they do not include the Populists. Rather he is part of “a long tradition . . . of appealing for the votes of the ‘common man’ by combining tough talk against malevolent elites with ugly scapegoating of marginalized groups.” This tradition can be traced at least as far back as Andrew Jackson, though the elites and

marginalized groups under assault at various times have differed. This is the tradition in which the so-called conservative populism of Wallace, Nixon, Reagan, Buchanan, and Trump should be placed.

Responsibility for labeling this tradition of elite-bashing and scapegoating as populism can be traced, Postel plausibly argues, to liberals such as Richard Hofstadter, who were fearful of mass right-wing politics in the early 1950s. Hofstadter and others argued for continuity between the Populists of the 1890s and the followers of Senator Joseph McCarthy: both were in the grip of "irrational myths of the past and unreasoned grievances about the present."

This claim for the Populist roots of McCarthyism was soundly discredited by Michael Rogin (*The Intellectuals and McCarthy*) and other historians who pointed out the decided discontinuity in ideology and constituency between the Populists and McCarthy, but its influence has persisted. When liberal George Packer (in the *New Yorker* last year) finds a shared populist "conspiratorial and apocalyptic bent" in both the Trump and Sanders campaigns or conservative David Brooks (in the *New York Times* in April) attacks them both for the populist belief that "every problem can be solved by finding some corrupt or oppressive group to blame," they are both channeling Hofstadter.

Postel would like journalists to find some term other than *populist* to apply to the likes of Trump. Sympathetic though I am to his impeccable historian's argument, I think it is much too late to rescue *populism* from journalists such as Packer who are convinced of "the volatile nature of populism," which "can ignite reform or reaction, idealism or scapegoating."

And, when all is said and done, there is something to their claim. It would be better to find a more satisfying way to connect right- and left-wing populism, Trump and Sanders. We need to understand populism in such a way that concedes its volatility and variability without simply demeaning all populists, as Brooks does, as dim-witted folk who are always prone to "reducing complex issues to simple fables."

I suggest that populism be defined as a predictable recurring feature of any society such as that of the United States that has never been willing or able to be as democratic as it claims to be. Few Americans, and no American politician, will own up to being antidemocratic. But since America's founding, American elites, particularly economic elites, have been engaged in a concerted and largely

successful effort to circumscribe and blunt the democratic possibilities of American politics. The Constitution, as its principal architect James Madison readily admitted, was designed to do just that. The preamble begins with an assertion of popular sovereignty, “We the People of the United States,” and then proceeds to lay out an institutional framework in which popular power is carefully minimized and no formal institutions are provided for its direct exercise.

Political parties, which are unforeseen and unmentioned in the Constitution, arose initially to open up a space for substantial indirect popular participation in government, but over time their democratizing possibilities have been steadily suppressed. We have long had a polity that finds its legitimation in a claim to be democratic but falls far short of government of, by, and for the people. And of late this divide between the nation’s supposedly governing ideal and its political reality has become ever more pronounced.

Today, what some have called the “democratic deficit” in our political system is huge and growing. Careful and dispassionate political scientists such as Larry Bartels, Martin Gilens, and Benjamin Page have compellingly established that the policy preferences of the majority of Americans have virtually no independent impact on the making of public policy. “The central point that emerges from our research,” Gilens and Page reported in 2014 (in *Perspectives on Politics*), “is that economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while mass-based interest groups and average citizens have little or no independent influence.” Ordinary citizens find their preferences realized in policy only when they coincide with those of wealthy Americans and corporate lobbyists, which on many important issues—including national health care, Social Security, aid to the unemployed, financial regulation, taxes, education spending—they have not.

“In the United States,” these political scientists conclude, “our findings indicate the majority does *not* rule—at least not in the causal sense of actually determining policy outcomes. When a majority of citizens disagrees with economic elites or with organized interests, they generally lose. Moreover, because of the strong status quo bias built into the U.S. political systems, even when fairly large majorities of Americans favor policy change, they generally do not get it.”

Populist moments then might be described as those occasions on which a substantial number of ordinary citizens become alert to the democratic deficit

around a particular issue or set of issues, overcome their apathy, find political vehicles by which to manifest their discontent, and move to close this shortfall between the views of ordinary citizens and public policy. As long as American politics remains formally democratic yet as substantively undemocratic as it has long been, it will witness periodic populist outbursts. Populism is the canary in the coal mine of American representative democracy.

Populism will vary according to the different understandings that populists have of the causes of the democratic deficit and their different proposals for closing it. It may well manifest misdirected “ugly scapegoating of marginalized groups,” but it need not do so. In the hands of Republican Party populists since 1968, directing their fire at “welfare queens” and immigrant Mexican “rapists,” it often has. But it may focus principally upon attacking centers of elite power which have truly enlarged the democratic deficit, as did the Populists of the late 19th century and as has Sanders, who like them has focused his critical energies on the “money power” of finance capitalism. Conceivably more than one populist insurgency can exist simultaneously, and for democrats, populism holds both peril and promise. Such has been the case in this presidential campaign.

The quite different populisms of Sanders and Trump are, for the moment, largely intraparty phenomena and not likely to clash directly, given Sanders negligible chance of securing the Democratic nomination.

To be sure, there is some intersection in the constituency and the views of these two populists. Each has found greater favor with the white working-class voters in his party than have his opponents. In part, this is because both are firmly opposed to international trade agreements negotiated by Democratic and Republican administrations alike, which both argue have had disastrous consequences for American workers. Both decry the limitations of Obamacare (though Sanders’s proposal for a single-payer system is far more radical than Trump’s vague call for an erasure of state boundaries in a modified Obamacare private insurance scheme), and neither has anything good to say about Republican efforts to privatize Social Security and Medicare. But on the whole, Sanders and Trump have offered a different account of the causes of the discontent of struggling Americans and different responses to it.

Sanders has centered his campaign on what most would agree are two of the principal causes of the democratic deficit: a stunning increase in economic

inequality over the last half century and a campaign finance system that readily translates this inequality into disproportionate political influence for the wealthy and for corporate interest groups—or, perhaps to put it better, translates into an eclipse of any independent political influence of ordinary citizens on their supposed representatives. Sanders has proposed reforms for the regulation of financial institutions and campaign finance, as well as a redistributive tax policy, a substantial increase in the minimum wage, and tuition-free public higher education. He has raised an enormous sum of money for his campaign strictly from small donors and eschewed the contributions of super PACs, proving that this is possible. If enacted, the reforms Sanders has proposed might substantially reduce the democratic deficit.

One of the striking things about Sanders's campaign is its appeal to young voters. They turned out in droves for his rallies, and he swamped Hillary Clinton with this demographic in primary after primary. Unlike their elders, they are undeterred by Sanders's open acknowledgment of his "democratic socialism." As Sanders pollster Ben Tulchin has said, younger voters support Sanders "because their generation is so fucked, for lack of a better word, unless they see dramatic change. What's their experience been with capitalism? They have had two recessions, one really bad one. They have a mountain of student-loan debt. They've got really high health-care costs, and their job prospects are mediocre at best. So that's capitalism for you."

The other striking thing about Sanders's campaign has been his failure to attract black voters, especially older black voters. The challenge of American racial divides has long bedeviled left-wing white populists. Black voters resist Sanders's efforts to enfold their concerns into class analysis and insist that he face up to the manner in which racial prejudice independently shapes their lives. Police forces around the country have lent substantial weight to their arguments, and Sanders has been slow and unsteady in his response to them.

African Americans remain convinced that the Clintons are more decidedly on their side, despite the considerable evidence that Michelle Alexander and others have provided to the contrary. Bill Clinton gets an apparent pass from black voters on the draconian crime bill of 1994 (for which he has, sort of, apologized), rising unemployment among young black men, and the welfare reform act of 1996. As does Hillary Clinton, who offered ongoing vocal support for her husband's policies, even weighing in with a particularly pungent characterization of a segment of black youth as "super-predators" (for which she has, sort of, apologized).

A skilled practitioner of identity politics, Hillary Clinton has successfully deflected such criticism and dressed herself in Barack Obama's mantle, promising to sustain Obamacare and much of the rest of the work of the nation's first black president. Rolling up a huge advantage in the black precincts in the South and elsewhere, Clinton has, like others before her, benefited from the inability of left populism to weave together a compelling mix of racial and economic egalitarianism. Nonetheless, this pivotal conundrum aside, Sanders has articulated the promise of populism as well as any American politician in recent memory.

Trump embodies its perils. He has had little to say about the inequality/campaign finance nexus. His tax plan is as disproportionately favorable to the wealthy as others that Republicans have dreamed up, and though he denounces the corruption that big money introduces into political campaigns, his solution seems to be that of nominating billionaires such as himself who can pay their own way. Trump, as Nicholas Lemann says, is "adept at playing the role of the very, very big guy who uniquely understands the little guy."

At the heart of Trump's appeal is a xenophobic nationalism that centers on his proposals for immigration and trade reform: building a massive wall on the Mexican border (at Mexican expense), deporting millions of undocumented immigrants, denying Muslims entry into the United States, and threatening trade wars with China and other economic competitors.

These proposals reflect the policy preferences of Trump's core constituency of white working-class voters among Republicans and independents. Since the economic crisis of 2008, these Americans have continued to suffer, while the wealthy, including the bankers who caused their suffering, have recovered quite nicely. These citizens have long served as indispensable rank-and-file Republican voters, despite the meager returns this political loyalty has produced. But as the dire effects of this crisis linger on, working-class voters have determined that the market fundamentalism of the party's elite has nothing to offer them and indeed betrays their interests. As *New York Times* reporter Nicholas Confessore says, "while wages declined and workers grew anxious about retirement, Republicans offered an economic program still centered on tax cuts for the affluent and the curtailing of popular entitlements like Medicare and Social Security. And where working-class voters saw immigrants filling their schools and competing against them for jobs, Republican leaders saw an emerging pool of voters to court."

To add insult to injury, some Republican leaders such as House Speaker Paul Ryan have retooled an argument once directed at the black poor and argued that the white working class is to blame for its own difficulties because it has lost its moral compass. It is a class of Americans, says Ryan, that have lost “their will and their incentive to make the most of their lives,” a moral collapse caused in part by the enervation brought on by the social programs which many of them depend on to survive. According to *National Review* columnist Kevin Williamson, white folks like my neighbors in Garbutt, New York, “in thrall to a vicious, selfish culture whose main products are misery and used heroin needles,” have no one to blame but themselves. “The problem isn’t that Americans cannot sustain families, but that they do not wish to.”

If many in the Republican establishment have turned their backs on this element of its party, Trump, these voters believe, is riding to their rescue. They are untroubled by his agnosticism on the Ku Klux Klan and his desire not only to turn away Muslim immigrants but to put their coreligionists in the United States under surveillance. Some of them are themselves racist; others are willing to cut Trump some slack when it comes to his racial and ethnic intolerance if he will, as he promises, use his putative skills as a deal maker to better their lives by reindustrializing the economy.

These Trump voters are not a majority of Republicans, let alone a majority of Americans. But their effective disenfranchisement does contribute to the democratic deficit, and their populism aims to reduce it. They are hardly democrats, however, nor is populism necessarily democratic. The democratic deficit can be closed by an oppressive, undemocratic majority, but it can also be widened by an oppressive, undemocratic minority. Hedge fund managers are not the only enemies of an egalitarian republic.

Hillary Clinton may well be the next president of the United States. Populism will go down to all-too-familiar defeat. Having heard her speeches to Goldman Sachs and other perpetrators of financial crisis, as the rest of us have not, Wall Street does not fear her. If Charles Koch is to be believed (a formidable qualification), even he and his brother, bankers for the Republican right, are apparently taking a wait-and-see attitude where she is concerned, given the unpalatable alternative that Trump presents. Another Clinton presidency will probably do little to reduce the democratic deficit. The most one can reasonably imagine is that it may do less than the last Clinton presidency to enlarge it.

In frustration and defeat, as Hofstadter warned, populisms can turn bitter and “sour.” Once Clinton secures the nomination, Sanders’s supporters may retreat to their private lives and sit out the election if they cannot bring themselves to hold their noses and vote for her. The violence that circles around Trump’s campaign, one already tainted with exceptional bitterness, might well occasion much more extreme expressions of sour disappointment. The general election promises to be as brutal a contest as the country has witnessed in the last century. Even if, as seems likely, Trump leads his troops over a cliff, we should still be afraid.

Ours is a country in which it is as easy to buy a gun as a lawnmower. Somewhere in America, Travis Bickle stands in front of a mirror in a red Trump cap practicing his draw and aiming to do what he can to make America great again.