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Preface to the 2017 Printing: Who Speaks for the People *Now*?

A SPECTER is, once again, haunting the United States and Europe—the specter of populism. Yet unlike the fear of communism famously evoked by Marx and Engels, the power of populism lies in its adaptable nature. Across the political spectrum, commentators seem eager to paste the label on forces and individuals who really have just one big thing in common: they are effective at blasting "elites" or "the establishment" for harming the interests and betraying the ideals of "the people"—proud in their ordinariness—in nations which are committed, at least officially, to democratic principles. Thus, President Donald Trump and Senator Bernie Sanders both get called populist, despite their mutual hostility and starkly different stances on nearly every issue from health care to business regulation to climate change. The term is also routinely affixed to both Jeremy Corbyn and Victor Orban, although the right-wing Hungarian prime minister would like to destroy every key element of the social-democratic agenda the current head of the British Labour Party wants to preserve and strengthen. Clearly, there can be no Populist Manifesto worthy of the name.[1]

My book traces the promiscuous history of this language of mass discontent from the nation's founding to near the end of the twentieth century. When it first appeared in 1995, the P-word had already become quite popular. The locutionary boom was sparked in the 1950s by a hot controversy among such prominent intellectuals as Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Bell, and C. Vann Woodward about whether Joseph McCarthy and his followers belonged to the same tradition as the People's Party, the original Populists. But it did not become a habit in journalistic discourse until midway through the following decade. During the tumultuous 1960s, the streets and airwaves crowded with protesters of all ideological stripes who claimed

to be fighting for the interests and values of a virtuous, exploited people against an immoral, grasping elite. "Populist" soon became a handle applied to anyone—from George Wallace to Ralph Nader to George McGovern—who fought the powers that be, however they were defined. At the end of the 2000 campaign, the *New York Times* even headlined that Al Gore, no one's idea of a rabble-rouser, dropped a "Populist Note" into a speech in Wisconsin where he declared, "We need to give democracy back to you, the people!"[2]

On occasion, an enterprising copywriter even adopted the term. In 1986, Banana Republic hawked its "Men's 100% Cotton Twill POPULIST Pants . . . steeped in grass-root sensibility and the simple good sense of solid workmanship . . . No-nonsense pants for the individual in everyman."[3]

But the great recession that began in 2007 turned what had been a rather lazy journalistic habit into an inescapable obsession. Amid the political and social turmoil that inevitably accompanies economic crises, nearly everyone who wrote about the fate of the United States or Europe seemed to agree that "populism" was on the rise and that the future of democratic societies depended, in part, on whether it would triumph. In late fall 2015, I was asked to speak about the topic at the annual dinner of the Council on Foreign Relations, as elite an intellectual institution as exists in the United States. The responses ranged from serious concern to alarm to outright fury. When I uttered a bit of empathy for the populist persuasion, Robert Rubin, the former top executive at Goldman Sachs who went on to serve as Secretary of Treasury under Bill Clinton, stood in the back of the room with his arms tightly crossed and a scornful expression on his face.

In 2016, two books appeared that took intelligent, erudite, and quite divergent views on the question. In *What Is Populism?* the German-born political scientist Jan-Werner Müller argued that populism is a dangerous phenomenon. It is, he writes, "always *a form of identity politics*" and "tends to pose a danger to democracy. For democracy requires pluralism and the recognition that we need to find fair terms of living together as free, equal, but also irreducibly diverse citizens."[4] In contrast, the progressive journalist John Judis viewed populism as a "logic," employed by both right and left, rather than a guide to how a candidate who bashes the elite in the name of "the people" might govern. "The people," after all, is among the most potent and fuzziest terms in the political lexicon. In *The Populist Explosion*, he does insist that all populists, whatever their ideology, make demands that are designed to be difficult, if not impossible, for the established powers to grant. Whenever populists do manage to gain a share of power, Judis maintains, they often lose their dissident edge. Thus, "American and Western European populist movements have flourished when they are in opposition, but have sometimes suffered identity crises when they have entered government."[5]

Müller and Judis make sensible arguments. Like most Europeans who write about the concept, Müller is painfully conscious of what demagogic appeals to an ethnically exclusive *volk* have wrought in his nation's and that continent's modern history. But Judis, in delinking the tropes of populism from the ways in which those who articulate them actually govern, better captures the suppleness of the rhetoric and suggests why it has become so common. At times of systemic crisis, citizens almost inevitably look to figures who blame entrenched leaders while assuring "the people" that they bear little or no responsibility for what has gone so wrong. As I detail in my book, this occurred in the United States during the depressions of the 1890s and 1930s. And it happened again after the financial collapse of 2008.

In the wake of the Great Recession, it should not have been surprising that the 2016 presidential contest in the United States featured two candidates who illustrated how starkly different a "populist" can be. Yet both Sanders and Trump railed against elites and "the establishment" for causing great harm to ordinary, "hard-working" Americans. And it was easy for reporters to find individuals who cast a ballot for the self-described "socialist" in a Democratic primary and then switched to Trump in the general election. For their part, critics often condemned them with the same pejorative. The conservative *National Review*, for instance, scorned both as "demagogues" who exploited public alarm and peddled impossible solutions to difficult problems. But since that word has been applied to everyone from Andrew Jackson to Franklin Roosevelt to Joe McCarthy to Barack Obama, it has lost much of its sting. The "populist" whose politics you abhor is always a demagogue disguised as a hero of the masses.[6]

Trump and Sanders actually represented two different, often competing, populist traditions that have long thrived in the United States. Pundits often speak of "left-wing" and "right-wing" populists. But those labels don't capture the most meaningful distinction between the different languages of mass discontent.[7] The first type of American populism directs its ire exclusively upward: at corporate elites and their enablers in government who have allegedly betrayed the interests of the men and women who do the nation's essential work. These populists embrace a conception of "the people" based on economic interests and avoid identifying themselves as supporters or opponents of any particular ethnic group or religion. They belong to a broadly liberal current in American political life; they advance a version of civic nationalism, which the historian Gary Gerstle defines as "belief in the fundamental equality of all human beings, in every individual's inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and in a democratic government that derives its legitimacy from the people's consent." Sanders advanced this type of populism in nearly every speech he delivered during his campaign for president.[8]

Adherents of the second American populist tradition—the one to which Trump belongs—also blame elites in big business and government for undermining the common folk's well-being and political liberties. But their definition of "the people" is narrower and ethnically restrictive. For most of U.S. history, it meant only citizens of European heritage—"real Americans" whose ethnicity alone afforded them a claim to share in the country's bounty. Typically, this breed of populist

alleges there is a nefarious alliance between evil forces on high and the unworthy, dark-skinned poor below—a cabal that imperils the interests and values of the patriotic (white) majority in the middle. The suspicion of an unwritten pact between top and bottom derives from a belief in what Gerstle calls "racial nationalism," a conception of "America in ethnoracial terms, as a people held together by common blood and skin color and by an inherited fitness for self-government."[9]

When Trump inveighed against Muslim-Americans and immigrants from Mexico, he was extending this ugly but powerful tradition. At his website Breitbart News, Steve Bannon, Trump's campaign manager and then chief political strategist in the White House, warned that "Judeo-Christian civilization" was at war with Islam and dark-skinned newcomers. And Bannon proudly wears the "populist nationalist" label.[10]

As I detail in this book, both types of American populists have, from time to time, gained political influence and victories. Andrew Jackson, the second Ku Klux Klan, Father Charles Coughlin, and the George Wallace campaign all belonged to the racialist tradition. The People's Party and the Congress of Industrial Organizations advanced the more tolerant alternative.

The rhetoric of all these individuals and groups included an element that Trump and Sanders lacked: a coherent, emotionally rousing description of "the people" they claimed to represent. The People's Party and its allies applauded the moral superiority of "the producing classes" who "created all wealth" with their muscles and brains. Their virtuous majority included industrial wage-earners, small farmers, and altruistic professionals such as teachers and physicians. For prohibitionists who backed the KKK, "the people" were the teetotaling white evangelical Christians who had the spiritual fortitude to protect their families and their nation from the scourge of the "liquor traffic." Conservatives such as Senator Barry Goldwater and President Ronald Reagan asserted they were speaking for the "taxpayers"—an updated version of the "producers" of old. In his 1968 presidential campaign, George Wallace lauded his "people" by naming their occupations: "the bus driver, the truck driver, the beautician, the fireman, the policeman, and the steelworker, the plumber, and the communications worker, and the oil worker and the little businessman."[11]

While vowing to "Make America Great Again," however, Trump offered only vague, nostalgic clichés about which Americans might help him accomplish that mighty, if mythic, feat. He employed such boilerplate terms as "working families," "our middle class," and, of course, "the American people"—a stark contrast to the vividness of his attacks, whether on Mexicans and Muslims or his political rivals ("little Marco," "lying Ted," "low-energy Jeb," and "crooked Hillary").

This absence suggests it has become increasingly difficult for populists—or any other breed of U.S. politician—to define a virtuous majority more precisely or evocatively. Since the 1960s, the United States has become an ever more multicultural nation. No one who seriously hopes to become president can afford to talk about "the people" in ways that clearly exclude anyone who isn't white and Christian.

Even Trump, in the latter months of his campaign, reached out, in a limited and somewhat awkward fashion, to African American and Latino citizens. Meanwhile, the group that populists in the racialist-nationalist tradition have historically praised as the heart and soul of the United States—the white working class—has become a shrinking minority. It remained, however, large enough to deliver Trump a victory in the Electoral College.

Progressive populists have also failed to solve the rhetorical challenge. Sanders, like Trump, was far more specific about defining the elite he despised—in his case, "the billionaire class"—than about who exactly would contribute to and benefit from his "revolution." Perhaps a candidate who drew his most ardent support from young Americans of all classes and races could not have defined his "people" more precisely, even had he wanted to.

In the past, populists' more robust concept of their base helped them build enduring coalitions—ones that could govern, not just campaign. By invoking identities that voters embraced—"producers," "white laborers" "Christian Americans," or President Richard Nixon's "silent majority"—politicians roused them to vote *for* their party and not merely against the alternatives on offer. Neither Democrats nor Republicans have been able to formulate such an appeal today, and that failing is both a cause and an effect of the public's distaste for both major parties. It may be impossible to come up with a credible definition of "the people" that can mobilize the dizzying plurality of class, gender, and ethnic identities which co-exist, often unhappily, in America today. But ambitious populists will probably not stop trying to concoct one.

Populism has certainly had an unruly past. Racists and would-be authoritarians have exploited its appeal, as have more tolerant foes of plutocracy and political malfeasance on high. But while populism can be dangerous, it may also be necessary. Throughout their history, Americans have found no more effective way to demand that those who wield political or economic power live up to the ideals of equal opportunity and self-government to which they routinely pay lip service. The People's Party's muckraking offensive against "the money power" helped bring about the enactment of the progressive income tax and antitrust laws. Organized labor's demand for "industrial democracy," coupled with FDR's attack on "economic royalists," did much to legitimize federal protection for union organizers. Bernie Sanders's blasts at a "corrupt political system" that benefits billionaires at the expense of wage-earners may yet result in measures to address the inequalities that have corroded American politics.

Populist talkers have thus often performed a service to the nation in the past and have the potential to do so again. They should, of course, avoid casting their opponents as evil conspirators out to destroy the livelihoods and liberties of their fellow citizens. But whatever their fate, one thing is certain: whenever what C. Vann Woodward called "future upheavals to shock the seats of power and privilege" occur, they will make themselves heard.[12]