

# States of the Union

## THE VOICES OF THE PEOPLE

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

**T**ODAY, folks, we are going to consider populism in its many guises. It is an idea whose time has come, gone and come again—the hope of the truly needy and the plaything of the truly neanderthal. It bears watching.

First, a riddle. What do populism and the taste of asparagus have in common? Answer. Both are instantly recognizable, neither is describable.

Second, a definition. Populism is the people's belief in The People, a position that is both secular and theological. *Vox populi, vox Dei*.

Third, a game. Let us now praise famous populists. Ronald Reagan is a conservative populist who has been given a "people's mandate" to pick on the poor. Jimmy Carter is a Southern agrarian populist who tried to make government "worthy of the people," failed and went back to growing peanuts in Americus. Lyndon Johnson was a Pedernales populist, as expansive and profane as all Texas. Richard Nixon was a closet populist—his majority was silent.

Thomas Jefferson was a gentleman populist who admired The People at a safe remove, from his Monticello veranda. He saw the world divided into two "natural" factions. "Those who fear and distrust the people, and wish

to draw all powers from them into the hands of the higher classes," and "those who identify themselves with the people, have confidence in them, cherish them." Alexander Hamilton was in charge of the first faction. "Your people, sir," he told a democratically-inclined acquaintance, "your people are a great beast."

Fourth, some questions and answers.  
Q Is populism joyful?

A Sometimes. Five years ago, in *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (Oxford), the historian Lawrence Goodwyn wrote of an "ecstasy" felt by members of the National Farmers Alliance as they marched toward utopia. It was, noted Goodwyn, "the most massive organizing drive by any citizen institution in 19th-century America," and it had "a kind of rustic grandeur."

Q Is populism sad?

A Sometimes. "In the darkness with a great bundle of grief the people march," wrote Carl Sandburg in "The People Live on."

Q What is it about populism that both appeals and repels?

A It appeals because it confers dignity on ordinary individuals and affords them a measure of self-respect. To be a populist is to feel important. It

repels because it both reifies and defies. It invests a pleasant abstraction, "The People," with human motives and aspirations, worse, it invites the charismatic kooks among us to entertain divine delusions. Populism is a variety of democratic hubris in constant danger of ending in national Nemesis. "I have grown from the people, I have remained in the people, and to the people I will return." Thus spake Mussolini.

Finally, a book, a remarkably clear-headed work on this notoriously muddled subject. In *Populism* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 360pp., \$17.95) Margaret Canovan, an English historian, takes us on a worldwide, historical tour of populist impulses and uprisings, hoping enroute to discover what, if anything, those disparate events bearing a single label had in common. It is a brave undertaking. For unlike Marxism or psychoanalysis, to cite two other slippery rubrics of the Western World, populism is less a set of doctrines than a jumble of feelings. It has no fundamental texts on which to draw and no "founding father" on whom to lavish reverence.

As Canovan disarmingly notes at the outset, "The reader opening a book entitled 'Populism' can have very little idea of what to expect. Although frequently used by historians, social scientists and political commentators, the term is exceptionally vague." The vagueness, of course, is part of the charm. Chameleon-like, populism assumes different guises in different places at different periods. Like the wheel it is constantly being reinvented, and like beauty it is mainly in the eye of the beholder—or, in the case of the French Revolution, of the behaeder.

Canovan's analysis covers more than a century of sporadic populist ferment and spans three continents, Europe (mostly Russia and Bulgaria) as well as North and South America. The U.S. agrarian version took its name from the People's Party of 1892, whose Presidential candidate, General James Weaver, polled more than a million votes—"a very creditable showing for a new third party," Canovan observes. The votes were chiefly Western and Southern pro-

tests against the East, Jeffersonians fighting Hamiltonians

Mary Elizabeth Lease, “the fiery Kansan,” summed up as well as anyone the populist spirit of the period, an amalgam of pride and paranoia “Wall Street owns the country It is no longer a government of the people, by the people and for the people, but a government of Wall Street, by Wall Street and for Wall Street The great common people of the country are slaves, and monopoly is the master” Jefferson had fired off an early warning in 1816, calling on his countrymen to “crush in its birth the aristocracy of our monied corporations which dare already to challenge our government” And although Canovan does not make the point, because she is after other quarry, the People’s Party was the last major response to that challenge

What Canovan seeks is not meaning but definition What *is* populism, anyway? From the People’s Party she proceeds to the *Narodnichestvo*, those aristocratic populists of Tsarist Russia, who, like Tolstoy, built an entire political philosophy on the presumed wisdom of the peasantry At about the time Horace Greeley was advising young Americans to go West, the anarchist Michael Bakunin was telling young Russians to “go to the people” —with startling consequences

“In the summer of 1874,” notes Canovan, “thousands of young people, girls as well as young men, abandoned their books and set off into the countryside, full of high hopes and ready for any sacrifice In order to get closer to the people, they dressed in peasant clothes and took up manual labor This mass pilgrimage to the people was doomed from the start Some of these young ladies and gentlemen were too carried away by the sheer romantic excitement of it all to do anything more practical than play at revolution”

As Canovan makes clear, the *Narodnichestvo* experiment was strictly a top-down affair, a silly attempt by young Russian intellectuals to “reach” the oppressed rural masses The masses, meanwhile, reacted to those philanthropic overtures in entirely predictable ways

According to Canovan, they grew evermore stolid, resentful and cunning “All that the populists had demonstrated,” she writes, “was their utter remoteness from the people they desperately longed to serve”

Reading about the Russian experience in the 1870s, I found it begging comparison with the American experience in the 1960s, when thousands of white Northern students swarmed into the South, extending their hands to The People The romance was there, to be sure, and so was the delusion of power

The children of Oberlin and Swarthmore, however, differed sharply from the children of St Petersburg In their Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) they had both an organization and an ideology, and in their civil rights program they had a set of defined political goals that could be achieved *within* the system If the *Narodnichestvo* were romantic revolutionaries, the SNCC kids more closely resembled practical agitators, the children of Saul Alinsky, not Bakunin

The *Narodnichestvo* hoped to redistribute land to a supine peasantry that was only a few years beyond the shackles of serfdom Their efforts seemed doomed because the peasants’ minds were still in chains The SNCC organizers had an easier and more sensible agenda They hoped to redistribute power, via the vote, to a twice-emancipated black proletariat The second emancipation came a century after the first, when Rosa Parks refused to sit in the back of the bus A daughter of slavery, she thus became a mother of the new populism

One striking feature of American-style populism is that it has generally avoided anarchic or dictatorial consequences, appealing instead to our instincts for cooperative, democratic reform The first words of the Constitution—“We the people”—served as a written guarantee that the populism in the New World would be a device not of the mob but of the Enlightenment

An exception that perhaps proves the rule was the egregious career of Huey Long, which Canovan rightly cites as an example of “dictatorial populism”

Long exploited pure populist doctrine for his own rancid purposes Did populists believe in the legislative process? Certainly, said Long, and Louisiana had “the best legislature money can buy” Did big corporations oppress The People? Absolutely “Corporations are the finest political enemies in the world”

One of Long’s campaign tactics, notes Canovan, was to attack the local big man in each parish he visited “I don’t want the bosses, I want the people on my side,” he’d say “If you believe that this is a state where every man is king but no man wears a crown, then I want you to vote for Huey Long

In assessing Long’s impact Canovan is fastidious and fair “There can be no doubt,” she writes, “about his popular backing, his common touch, and the real benefits he gave his supporters At the same time, he was a cynical manipulator who used his popular appeal to gain wealth and power for himself, who had no respect for law or constitution, who would not brook opposition, and who made himself virtual dictator of Louisiana” In sum, “he reduced [the citizens] to political impotence—” —the very malady they had been counting on him to cure

One comes away from this fine work marveling at the varieties of populist experience while regretting the contradictions they produce Democracy and despotism, tolerance and bigotry, enlightenment and know-nothingism—all these and more can be discovered within populism’s bubbling cauldron

As we measure this mystery, it makes sense for us to be gingerly in our grasp and modest in our reach Who needs Mussolini? Who wants another Huey Long? Yet in this age of neoconservatism and nay-sayers it also makes sense to encourage whatever populist impulses are stirring within us For the sum of those faint agitations represents our collective social conscience, the best of our yesterdays and probably the brightest of our tomorrows Populism may not be the purest of doctrines or the truest of movements, but at this juncture in American history it is pretty much all we have to hope with