Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort

Educational Slideshow - Part One

A course of study based on the book by Chip Berlet & Matthew N. Lyons
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The Book that Predicted the Tea Party Movement

“Berlet and Lyons show how large numbers of disaffected Americans have embraced right–wing populism in a misguided attempt to challenge power relationships in U.S. society. Highlighted are the dangers these groups pose for the future of our political system”

--Publisher’s Blurb
Educational Slideshow:
Right-Wing Populism in the 2016 Election in the United States

Based on a revised version of the Introduction to the book:

by Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons
Introduction

Right-wing politics in the United States has taken many forms since the end of the Cold War. The rise of the armed citizens militias accompanied electoral support for Patrick Buchanan’s xenophobic economic nationalism.

Christian evangelical groups at times dominated the Republican Party while the Promise Keepers filled stadiums with praying men.

Major politicians denounced undocumented immigrants and poor single mothers while libertarian antigovernment attitudes flourished.

On talk radio, discussions of black helicopters, secret teams, and sinister elites envisioned a massive global conspiracy. Some boldly asserted that President Clinton assisted drug smugglers, ran a hit squad that killed his political enemies, and covered up the assassination of his aide Vincent Foster.
In 1995 a powerful homemade bomb—delivered in a rental truck driven by a fresh-faced American neonazi named Timothy McVeigh—destroyed the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

The blast killed 167 persons (including 19 children in an onsite day care center), and injured over 650 more. One rescue worker died. Violence from the Far Right continued, targeting abortion providers, people of color, gay men and lesbians, and Jews.
Introduction:

Militias & Patriots

In this book we show how all of these phenomena involve some form of right-wing populism—a concept we think is crucial to understanding not just the U.S. political Right, but also our history as a nation.

Right-wing populist movements often defy conventional explanations of “extremism” because they combine attacks on socially oppressed groups with grassroots mass mobilization and distorted forms of antielitism based on scapegoating.

We will trace right-wing populism from its roots in the colonial period up to the present, and show how it has been interwoven with this country’s central institutions, structures, and political traditions.
Introduction: Militias & Patriots

One of the most visible right-wing populist movements from the mid-1990s to the present has been the armed citizens militias. As the militant cutting edge of a much larger “Patriot” movement, the militias collected weapons, conducted paramilitary training, advocated armed self-defense against what they saw as an increasingly repressive federal government.

And they warned of a vast elite conspiracy to subject the United States to a tyrannical “New World Order.”

Militias and Patriot groups were complicated—bringing together hard-core neonazis with a much wider array of right-wing antigovernment activists.
Introduction: Militias & Patriots

The movement was pervaded by conspiracy theories historically rooted in antisemitism; and by arcane constitutional doctrines that implicitly rejected women’s suffrage, citizenship rights for people of color, and the abolition of slavery.

Yet many supporters seemed unaware of (or indifferent to) the history or politics of these oppressive ideas. Most of the militias disavowed ethnic bigotry, and some of them included a handful of Jews and people of color as members.

Here was a movement that seemingly blurred the line between hate ideology and inclusiveness, and that mixed reactionary scapegoating with progressive-sounding attacks on economic injustice, political elitism, and government repression.

Introduction: Militias & Patriots

As is true for the militias, members of other recent right-wing populist movements have often spoken or acted in ways that challenged outsiders’ expectations.

Despite a history of close collaboration between law enforcement agencies and paramilitary rightists, sections of the neonazi–Klan movement undertook armed combat against the U.S. government beginning in the 1980s.

Although the Right has regularly championed private enterprise and business interests, ultraconservative leader Patrick Buchanan denounced multinational corporations and “unfettered capitalism.”

Although the Christian Right was virulently antifeminist and staunchly Eurocentric, major sections of that movement urged women to become politically active and to develop leadership skills, or made genuine efforts to build alliances with conservative Black, Latino, and Asian organizations.

This type of political complexity is not new. We will place the Christian Right, the Buchananites, and the militias in a long line of right-wing populist movements such as Father Coughlin’s movement in the 1930s, the anti-Chinese crusade of the 1880s, and the Ku Klux Klan.
Right-wing populist movements often borrow political slogans, tactics, and forms of organization from the Left, but harness them to rightist goals.

They attract people who often have genuine grievances against elites, but channel such resentments in ways that reinforce social, cultural, political, or economic power and privilege.
Introduction:

Who Benefits?

Historically, right-wing populist movements have reflected the interests of two different kinds of social groups, often in combination:

1. Middle-level groups in the social hierarchy, notably middle- and working-class Whites, who have a stake in traditional social privilege but resent the power of upper-class elites over them, and,

2. “Outsider” factions of the elite itself, who sometimes use distorted forms of antielitism as part of their own bid for greater power.
Introduction:

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The Ku Klux Klan is an Example

The original Ku Klux Klan of the late 1860s represented an alliance between:

- some lower-and middle-class southern Whites (outraged that Black emancipation and Reconstruction had eroded their social privilege),
- and southern planters (who sought to win back some of the power they had lost to northern capitalists in the Civil War).
Introduction:

The Ku Klux Klan

The Klan combined racist terrorism against Black people and their allies with demagogic antielite rhetoric about northern “military despotism.” While the original Klan is generally remembered today as an “extremist” movement, its politics reflected traditions considered mainstream.

For example, Jacksonianism in the early nineteenth century (on which the modern-day Democratic Party is founded), is typically thought of as a progressive reform movement that championed “the common man” and helped to democratize the U.S. political system.
Yet the Jacksonian political reforms, such as Pennsylvania’s 1838 Constitution, disenfranchised Black men while giving the vote to poor White men.

The Jacksonians spearheaded the murderous forced expulsion of American Indians, as in the 1838 Trail of Tears, when thousands of Cherokees died after being driven from their homes at gunpoint. And the

Jacksonians denounced “the money power” of federal central banking as an evil conspiracy, yet upheld class inequality.
Like many of the movements discussed in this book, Jacksonianism represented an alliance between lower-class Whites and certain factions of the elite.

When the Klan emerged a few years later in the 1920s as the first truly right-wing populist movement, its constituency, doctrine, and rhetoric were largely Jacksonian.

> In 2016 Donald Trump’s use of right-wing populist rhetoric was especially appealing to lower middle class White people who felt disenfranchised and displaced. (cb)
Introduction:

Dynamics

Right-wing populist movements are subject to the same basic dynamics as other social movements, and their members are, for the most part, average people motivated by a combination of material and ideological grievances and aspirations.

Despite widespread popular rhetoric, it is neither accurate nor useful to portray right-wing populists as a “lunatic fringe” of marginal “extremists.”

Right-wing populists are dangerous not because they are crazy irrational zealots—but because they are not.

These people may be our neighbors, our coworkers, or our relatives.
This introduction presents some of the basic conceptual tools we will use in the book.

We explain the concept of populism and the many forms it can take, including right-wing populism.

This leads into a discussion of major right-wing populist themes:

- Producerism
- Demonization
- Scapegoating
- Conspiracism
- Apocalypticism
- Millennialism
After discussing the major right-wing populist themes we outline our view of right-wing populist movements as social movements with a contradictory relationship to the established social and political order.

This is followed by an overview of subcategories within the Right, from conservatism to fascism.

We conclude by outlining some of the key issues developed in the chapters that follow, such as right-wing populism’s relationship to White supremacy and male dominance.
Introduction:

What is Populism?

There is much confusion over the term *populism*.

Margaret Canovan, in one of the few in-depth studies of the subject, mapped populism onto two main branches—agrarian and political—with seven overlapping subcategories.

Although we do not use her typology in this book, her excellent analysis shows how many different kinds of political movements and phenomena have been labeled as populist.

Canovan first divides populism into two main branches:

**Agrarian and Political**
Agrarian populism includes:

• Commodity farmer movements with radical economic agendas such as the U.S. People’s Party of the late 1800s.

• Subsistence peasant movements such as eastern Europe’s Green Rising movement after World War I.

• Intellectuals who wistfully romanticize hard-working farmers and peasants and build radical agrarian movements like the late-nineteenth-century Russian *narodniki* or the U.S. back-to-the-land movement in the 1960s.
Introduction: What is Populism?

Political populism includes:

- **Populist democracy**, including calls for more political participation, such as the use of referenda; recent examples include the general perspective of columnists Jim Hightower and Molly Ivins.

- **Politicians’ populism** marked by vague appeals for “the people” to build a unified coalition such as used by Ross Perot in his presidential campaigns in the 1990s.

- **Reactionary populism** such as the White backlash against civil rights that was harvested by George Wallace in the 1960s and 1970s and reseeded to some extent by Patrick Buchanan in the 1990s.

- **Populist dictatorship** such as that established by Juan Peron in Argentina in 1945–1955 or envisioned by some U.S. neonazi groups.
Introduction: What is Populism?

Across this wide range of categories there are only two universal elements.

Canovan argues: all forms of populism “involve some kind of exaltation of and appeal to ‘the people,’ and all are in one sense or another antielitist.”

We take these two elements—celebration of “the people” plus some form of antielitism—as a working definition of populism.

A populist movement—as opposed, for example, to one-shot populist appeals in an election campaign—uses populist themes to mobilize a mass constituency as a sustained political or social force.

Our discussion of populism will focus mainly on populist movements.

Michael Kazin calls populism a **style** of organizing. Populist movements can be on the right, the left, or in the center. They can be egalitarian or authoritarian, and can rely on decentralized networks or a charismatic leader. They can advocate new social and political relations or romanticize the past.

Especially important for our purposes, populist movements can promote forms of antielitism that target either genuine structures of oppression or scapegoats alleged to be part of a secret conspiracy. And they can define “the people” in ways that are inclusive and challenge traditional hierarchies, or in ways that silence or demonize oppressed groups.
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