
Populism vs. Elitism

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The Road to Mass Democracy: Original Intent and the Seventeenth Amendment, by C.H. Hoebeke. *New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995. 211 pp. \$29.95.*

The Populist Persuasion, by Michael Kazin. *New York: Basic Books, 1995. 381 pp. \$24.00.*

The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy, by Christopher Lasch. *New York: W. W. Norton, 1995. 288 pp. \$22.00.*

Americans have always been divided concerning the kind of democracy that the Framers created. Since the time of the Founding, the very meaning of democracy has been in dispute in American culture. Two traditions are discernable in American political thought: one believes that America is too democratic, the other that it is not democratic enough.

At the heart of the debate regarding American democracy and the Constitution is the role of elites. Beginning with the Antifederalists, a distrust of elites inspired opposition to the Constitution. In fact, the tradition of American political thought repre-

sented by the American Framers has been politically and intellectually challenged by populism and kindred ideologies since its inception. The populist movement of the late nineteenth century, for example, captured the imaginations of Americans who tended to blame the political, social, and economic failures of the day on America's elites. The populist prescription at that time was typical of populism: reform the constitutional system. Populist and Progressive reforms decreased the power of elites and empowered "the people."

Populism has become a major ideological influence in contemporary

American politics. Both Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, commonly use populist rhetoric and promote populist public policies. The "Contract with America" incorporates several populist themes, among them the call for congressional term limits. Ross Perot has capitalized on populist sentiment in proposing the creation of a third political party.

These reforms and others are based on the premise that the current political elites cannot be trusted and that political power is more responsibly exercised by the people.

The recent resurgence of populism in American politics is driven by two primary factors. One is the intellectual and political tradition represented by such figures as Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, and William Jennings Bryan. The other factor is the growing discontent with America's political leadership. Populism has become a more attractive response to political, social, and economic troubles because the elite class seems incapable of providing the quality of leadership that is necessary for good government.

The populist challenge to the American constitutional order has received increasing attention from scholars. Three recent books address various aspects of the populist movement in America, and they all share a common feature. In one way or another, they attempt to answer the question, "Is populism right for America?" The three books are C. H. Hoebeker's *The Road to Mass Democracy*, Michael Kazin's *The Populist Persuasion*, and Christopher Lasch's *The*

Revolt of the Elites. These works discuss various aspects of populism in America such as its historical, economic, and social origins.

American populism is not a politically monolithic ideological movement. It manifests itself at different times in a wide range of historical circumstances. It is advocated by conservatives, liberals, libertarians, and other ideological groups. The meaning of populism is easily obscured if its fundamental philosophical identity is divorced from the particular political forms it takes. The search for the deeper meaning of populism requires a marriage of political theory and history.

We learn what populism is partly by examining the particular historical circumstances in which it has occurred. These three books examine a significant portion of the American populist experience. But understanding and assessing populism also requires a theoretical framework within which it can be analyzed. Without such a framework, the difficult questions and issues raised by populism will not receive the critical reflection that is necessary to give populism a fair hearing. For example, what is the philosophical and historical basis for populism's disdain of elites? Is this disdain historically and philosophically well-grounded? Or is populism merely a ploy by demagogues to wrestle power from the current elite? If there is no historical and philosophical ground for replacing elites with "the popular will," then populism's challenge to the American constitutional order will be viewed differently

than if there is such a ground. Consequently, in assessing Hoebeke's, Kazin's, and Lasch's work, attention will be given to their respective historical and philosophical frameworks and to their ability to penetrate to the experiential sources of populism. For it is that core experience that provides insights into the challenge of populism and that also provides a standard by which to judge the efficacy of populism as a response to the disorder of the age.

All writers on the subject are not predisposed to systematic philosophical analysis. Yet, most of the work on populism implies a philosophical understanding of what populism is, even if the author claims to be simply describing history. An author's philosophical assumptions can be teased out of a work that includes at least some critical analysis.

Kazin's book explicitly shies away from theoretical analysis. It is a rambling, at times disjointed, description of populism. *The Populist Persuasion* attempts to analyze populism by exploring the history of populist rhetoric. Kazin considers the words of populist leaders the best illustration of populism's meaning and importance. He makes no attempt to discover or explain the roots of populism. He assumes that populist rhetoric speaks for itself. He does attempt to provide a basic definition of populism: "a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter" (1).

Although Kazin fails to acknowledge it, the rhetoric of populism has an underlying theoretical foundation. In fact, his analysis of the language of populism indicates that he is sympathetic to that theoretical core.

Kazin sees it as his task, however, not to elucidate what populism is as much as to editorialize about good and bad populism. In short, right-wing populism is bad and left-wing populism is good. Populism has a rather specific content according to Kazin. Its primary objective is a more equal distribution of wealth and the empowerment of minorities and women. It is clear that Kazin's egalitarianism colors his assessment of populism. Populism, for him, is a means of reshaping America. He assumes that the masses, if given the political power and led by the right elites, would implement his "non-Communist Left" agenda. He believes that "mass democracy can topple any haughty foe." Thus *The Populist Persuasion* is not really an analysis of populism but a political tract.

Contrary to Kazin's analysis of populism, Hoebeke's study of mass democracy is theoretical as well as historical. Unlike Kazin, he views populism as both politically and ideologically inconsistent with the political and philosophical tradition of the American Framers. Kazin's book provides a broad history of populism divorced from philosophical analysis. *The Road to Mass Democracy* examines a particular populist event, the adoption of the Seventeenth Amendment, and uses it to discover the theoretical features of populism. It should be

noted that Hoebeke does not use the term “populism” to describe the push for the Seventeenth Amendment. He labels it “progressive.” But it is clear from his work that there are no significant philosophical differences between populism and progressivism, at least as far as the Seventeenth Amendment is concerned. Hoebeke’s primary concern is with populism’s effect on American democracy. He views the political movement that succeeded in passing the Seventeenth Amendment as indicative of democratic reforms that have as their ultimate objective the removal of institutional restraints on the popular will. He considers such reforms dangerous because “The premise underlying all these innovations in our form of government is that the direct expression of the people more accurately reflects the general sense of the community and is less corruptible than judgments made by small assemblies invested with only temporary authority” (4). Hoebeke demonstrates that what may seem from its rhetoric to be empowering the people turns out, in the case of the Seventeenth Amendment, to make government less, rather than more, accountable to the people.

The arguments made by the advocates of the Seventeenth Amendment included the idea that the amendment would decrease the influence of special interests, especially moneyed interests, and make senators more responsive to the people. It was also hoped that the amendment would change the class of individuals who served in the Senate. Hoebeke’s study concludes that the Seventeenth

Amendment neither decreased the influence of special interests nor changed the type of people who serve in the Senate. The Seventeenth Amendment was a case of states’ abdicating their power to the voting public; the amendment was ratified by the states. Hoebeke suggests that the movement toward mass democracy is now taking place at the federal level of government. Members of Congress who support term limits, for example, seem willing to abdicate their power to the people. These attempts to reform the American political system by making it more democratic are considered unwise by Hoebeke, because they have not been tested against historical experience. Populist reformers have moved the country toward mass democracy by claiming that they are restoring American democracy to its pure form. Special interests have distorted the political system, and populist reforms will restore it. Unfortunately these reformers misunderstand the nature of the American constitutional system. One of its primary purposes is to allow for thwarting the people’s will or at least, to use Madison’s words, for refining and enlarging it. For Hoebeke, then, populism is not a prudent remedy for American political and social disorder.

Christopher Lasch’s book *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* is a fascinating commentary on the state of American culture. Our culture—the common attitudes, traditions, and customs that make us what we are—is the foundation for our system of government. It is inconceiv-

able, Lasch argues, that the American political system could have been created apart from the culture of eighteenth-century America or the culture of Western civilization more generally.

The current state of our culture, as Lasch points out, seems unable to support our political institutions. Crime, drugs, corruption, teenage suicide, illegitimacy, and a host of other problems call into question the viability of American democracy. Lasch provides an insightful analysis of the new cultural elite and a comparison between it and the old cultural elite. He is especially critical of the contemporary moneyed elite. Unlike the old elite, members of the New Class have little sense of stewardship. Their selfishness has made them abandon their family and community roots because “[a]mbitious people understand . . . that a migratory way of life is the price of getting ahead. It is a price they gladly pay, since they associate the idea of home with intrusive relatives and neighbors, small-minded gossip, and hidebound conventions” (5). Lasch claims that the new elites are “in revolt against ‘Middle America’ ” or at least what they imagine it to be. The New Aristocracy, as he calls it, tends to live on the coasts where life is exciting, money is fast-moving, and culture, so they believe, is on the cutting edge.

Lasch sees this new aristocracy as a significant cause of American democracy’s decline. “Democracy works best when men and women do things for themselves, with the help of friends and neighbors, instead of depending on the state” (7-8). But the

new elite leaves family and community responsibility behind to search for wealth and status; its members are not self-reliant. Consequently, government must provide the care for family and community. The new elite has abdicated its responsibility to itself and society. The resulting decline in American communities, Lasch believes, calls into question the future of democracy in America. It is the elite class that has betrayed democracy. In fact, Lasch contrasts his analysis with José Ortega y Gasset’s in *The Revolt of the Masses*. Ortega blamed the crisis of Western culture on the political rise of the masses. Lasch attributes the current cultural crisis to the revolt of the elites.

Today it is the elites . . . those who control the international flow of money and information, preside over philanthropic foundations and institutions of higher learning, manage the instruments of cultural production and thus set the terms of public debate . . . that have lost faith in the values, or what remains of them, of the West (25-26).

The cultural elite has severed itself from the masses. Elites not only despise what the masses believe, but they feel no obligation to cultivate a relationship with them. They isolate themselves geographically, intellectually, and in every other way from the masses. In essence, Lasch describes two cultures. One is the culture of the coastal elites, highly individualistic, secular, intellectual, and economically prosperous. The other is the culture of the Heartland. It is oriented to com-

munity, family, religion, common sense, and the values of middle-class economics. Lasch looks to various cultural institutions for signs of hope and finds few. The mass-media elites, for example, are incapable of presenting information in a way that would encourage the common people to take an interest in politics and culture. He blames Walter Lippmann for disregarding the ability of the masses to understand public policy. The people would be more informed if journalists would abandon the Lippmann model of reporting information, e.g., writing for policy makers and not the people.

The universities and churches are also institutions that provide little hope. Both, Lasch claims, are divided by the political left and right. Both left and right share the same premise: a set of unquestioned dogmas is needed before American culture can regain its bearings. As people become dogmatic, public discourse becomes difficult. For example, political correctness in the university stifles meaningful discussion about important cultural issues. Only those who embrace the "correct" dogma are invited to the public square to participate in a dialogue about the meaning of American society.

What does Lasch think is the appropriate response to the betrayal of democracy in America? Throughout the book he mentions some hopeful developments. The revival of Dewey's pragmatism is an example. Lasch is not clear about what he means, but he seems to imply that Dewey's pragmatism allows for a rejection of dogma without declining into nihilism. He

also finds hope in the masses. While the elites have betrayed democracy by revolting from Western values, the masses cling to them. Lasch writes of the masses,

their political instincts are demonstrably more conservative than those of their self-appointed spokesmen and would-be liberators. It is the working and lower middle classes, after all, that favor limits on abortion, cling to the two-parent family as a source of stability in a turbulent world, resist experiments with "alternative lifestyles," and harbor deep reservations about affirmative action and other ventures in large-scale social engineering (27).

It is this sentiment in Lasch's book that leads the reader to conclude that he embraces populism. If the elites are rotten, let the people lead the country. But Lasch's faith in the people is qualified. Our cultural infrastructure must be rebuilt. The idea that market mechanisms are the solution to our problems should be rejected. Populism can play a role in the restoration of culture because it opposes the two primary causes of the American cultural crisis: the market and the welfare state. Lasch's remedy is a mixture of populism and communitarianism, combining the left's disdain for the market and the right's disdain for the welfare state. We must look outside the conventional debate for efficacious solutions to the crisis of democracy.

Commentators on Lasch's book have credited him with a new and creative vision for America. While *The Revolt of the Elites* is an intriguing and

thoughtful analysis, it is by no means original. Russell Kirk, for one, has made similar arguments for the past forty years. His brand of conservatism rejects both the market and the state as the foundation for political and social order. Lasch never mentions Kirk in *The Revolt of the Elites*, although the similarity between their arguments is striking on topics like neighborhoods, materialism, and the new elite. There are ultimately important differences between Kirk and Lasch (on religion for example), but Kirk's contribution deserves consideration.

Although *The Revolt of the Elites* identifies the source of the cultural crisis in America, Lasch's embrace of populism is poorly supported. As Hoebeke notes, the value of populism ultimately depends on how it stands up to historical, and I would add philosophical, scrutiny. Lasch fails to consider the philosophical and historical meaning of populism. He usually qualifies his references to populism with the statement "as I understand it," but he never subjects the concept to rigorous analysis. Lasch simply ignores the substantial body of scholarly work on populism and relies instead on rather vague notions of what it is. The same lack of rigorous philosophical analysis is characteristic of Kazin's

book. There is a journalistic aspect to Kazin's volume that leaves the serious reader wanting for a more penetrating analysis. Both books present ideas worth considering, but readers must look elsewhere for deeper analysis. Hoebeke's book, although more limited in its historical scope than those of Kazin and Lasch, probes the essence of populism much more deeply. Not coincidentally, Hoebeke rejects populism and the "empowerment" of the people as a prudent prescription for the political and cultural crisis. But Lasch and Kazin embrace it. Lasch wraps his populism in a cultural ethos that limits many of its dangers, whereas Kazin is scarcely aware of the deeper problems of populism. Unlike Lasch, he does not acknowledge the moral void in the New Class; in fact, his analysis itself represents the very type of cultural elitism that Lasch rejects. Those who quickly dismiss populism as a response to the disorder of the age will find a challenging argument in *The Revolt of the Elite*. Hoebeke's analysis is at times too categorical in its criticism of populism. Combining aspects of Hoebeke's and Lasch's work provides an interesting venue for assessing populism and the state of American democracy.