

Renewal or Rupture: Can populist movements in the United States be generative of democratic renewal, or are they structurally inclined to erode democratic norms?

Introduction

Over the last decade in the United States, the very invocation of ‘populism’ has elicited a veritable indignation among liberal scholars, the media and politicians. The behemoth ‘MAGA’ movement and the apotheotic rise of Donald Trump has precipitated this chorus of reproach, lending credence to the entrenched liberal orthodoxy that anathematises populism as anti-pluralistic and fundamentally inimical to American democracy. This narrative propagates that popular will, when unmediated by elites, unravels into demagoguery and majority despotism. However, despite liberal aporias, an alternative current prevalent among radical democrats and post-Marxian theorists insists that populism is a modality of emancipatory plebian politics. Populism, inherently elusive and semantically contested, has in turn provoked an equally elusive and polemical debate concerning its relationship with democracy.

This essay shall answer the following question ‘Can populist movements in the United States be generative of democratic renewal, or are they structurally inclined to erode democratic norms?’ arguing that populism’s relationship with democracy is ambivalent, evidenced in the striking divergences in the nineteenth century People’s Party and contemporary Tea Party movement. These epochal populist movements, both enveloped in a Manichean moral cosmology, were grassroots mobilisations that claimed to represent the popular will against entrenched elites. In the first chapter, this essay shall establish the theoretical frameworks through which populism may be understood, delineating the contours of populism’s contested relationship with democracy. The second and third chapters will briefly introduce the two case studies that anchor this investigation. These will be followed by chapter four, which will undertake a comparative analysis of each movement’s construction of “the people,” their adversarial imaginary of “the elite,” and their respective orientation toward political institutions and democratic norms. Employing a discursive theoretical approach to populism, this essay shall contend that the nineteenth-century People’s Party articulated an inclusive, participatory and democratically capacious populism aimed at structural reform to serve the demos. In contrast, the Tea Party movement, which emerged in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, promulgated a moralised and anti-pluralist populism that eschewed normative democratic principles.

Chapter One: Theoretical Framework

Prior to engaging with the behemoth question of whether populist movements in the United States serve as a catalyst for democratic renewal or precipitate democratic erosion, it is important to undertake a critical examination of the conceptual frameworks that have emerged within the scholarly discourse around populism. At the helm of this scholarship stands Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde, whose work on populisms across Europe and the United States have unequivocally shaped contemporary understandings of the phenomenon. Mudde offers a paradigmatic definition of populism, conceiving it as “thin centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). This conceptualisation of populism as a “thin-centred ideology” follows

British political scientist Michael Freeden's theorisation of nationalism as a limited ideology, anchored in a limited conceptual core (Freeden, 1998). For Mudde, the phenomenon of populism possesses this limited conceptual core, its restricted morphology rendering it devoid of the intellectual rigour and consistency as other ideologies, such as liberalism (Mudde, 2004, p. 544). The ideational paradigm conceives populism as a division between a "homogenous 'good'" and a homogenous 'evil', a Manichean framing of an aggrieved virtuous people in antagonism with a corrupt elite (Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p.17). The thin-centredness of the phenomenon enables its underlying Manichean cosmology to align itself with multiple ideologies traversing the entire left-right political spectrum.

Despite this malleability, political theorists have sought to underscore the supposed anti-democratic impulses inherent in all iterations of populism. As Nadia Urbinati contends, populism "shows itself to be intolerant of civil liberties" as it "defers exclusively to the winning majority to solve disagreements within society, ... tends to shatter the mediation of institutions by making them directly subject to the will of the ruling majority ... [and] constructs a representation of the people that, while inclusive of the large majority, is ex ante exclusionary of another part" (Urbinati, 2019, p. 11). For Urbinati, The Manichean binary between "the people" and "the establishment" reflects a possessive and exclusionary conception of politics that strains the foundations of constitutional democracy and verges perilously on fascist logic.

Despite this notable chorus among liberal scholars, journalists, and politicians denouncing populism as intrinsically antagonistic to democracy, such a dismissal fails to withstand rigorous scrutiny. Far from being a democratic aberration, in its invocation of an unfiltered and sovereign vox populi, populism adheres to the primordial essence of democracy grounded in the direct and unalloyed expression of the collective will (Espejo, 2017). In this sense, populism invokes one of the oldest tenets of democracy "hoi polloi versus hoi oligoi", an anti-oligarchic principle that positions the majority as the legitimate locus of political authority (Vergara, 2020). Post-Marxist Belgian political scientist Chantal Mouffe contends that liberal democracy has undergone a structural depoliticisation, whereby the constitutive tension between the liberal emphasis on individual rights and the democratic principle of collective equality has been hollowed out by neoliberal hegemony (Mouffe, 2005, Mouffe, 2018). The result is what she terms "post-democracy", a regime where democracy is reduced to electoral procedure while popular sovereignty is relegated to obscurity (2018, p. 18). Populism, for many radical democrats, is thus most cogently understood as not an erosion of democracy but a reaction to its attenuation under neoliberal post-democracy.

It is precisely in this context that populism re-emerges as a vital, albeit contentious, modality of democratic politics. As Vergara (2020) argues, populism should be re-conceptualised as a form of plebian politics, rooted in the material and symbolic construction of "the people" through the politicisation of inequality. This reading locates populism within a broader genealogy of emancipatory political traditions, linking it to the Russian Narodniks of the 1860s, the anti-plutocratic movements of 1890s American agrarian populism, and the redistributive populisms of Latin America in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (p. 223). Yet, this emancipatory potential is not inherent to populism itself. As Ernesto Laclau (2005) theorised, populism is not an ideology but a discursive logic for constructing a collective identity out of heterogeneous demands through the articulation of an "empty

signifier” (p. 69). “The people” is thus a retroactively constituted subject, forged through the linking of grievances against a shared antagonist. This discursive malleability means that populism is ideologically underdetermined, possessing either democratic or undemocratic impulses dependent on its articulation.

Consequently, attempts to evaluate populism solely through the ideational lens as a “thin-centred ideology” fail to capture its political ambivalence. What is required instead is a theoretical framework that can hold in tension populism’s dual capacity to democratise by expanding political inclusion, or to erode democracy through exclusionary sentiments. This is why the Laclauian discursive framework is indispensable. As a discursive logic and mode of political articulation, populism is not inherently inimical to democratic principles. Rather, its normative implications depend on the contexts in which it emerges. Far from being intrinsically corrosive to democratic governance, populism often functions as a contested site where the *vox populi* is invoked to reconstitute or reclaim political legitimacy. The ensuing case studies of the People’s Party and the Tea Party illuminate the complex entanglements between populist movements and democracy, revealing populism as a dynamic force that can either renew or erode democracy.

Chapter Two: The People’s Party

In the crucible of late 19th-century America, an alliance of agrarian workers and industrial laborers precipitated an epochal chapter in American history: the genesis of the People’s Party. Rallying beneath the resonant banner of “the democracy of producers,” the Populists decried the corrosive consolidation of economic power of the Gilded Age, assailing the entrenched oligarchies of finance and industry that, in their view, had subverted the republic’s foundational promise of political and economic egalitarianism. In its first national convention in Omaha, Nebraska in 1892, the People’s Party espoused its political manifesto titled ‘The Omaha Platform’, declaring:

We meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin. Corruption dominates the ballot-box, the Legislatures, the Congress, and touches even the ermine of the bench... From the same prolific womb of governmental injustice we breed the two great classes — tramps and millionaires. (People’s Party, 1892)

Here, the People’s Party propound the corruption of the monopolistic corporations, using the evocative language to propagate the bifurcation of the two classes of workers and oligarchs in nineteenth-century America. There is a discernible dissonance in the literature on the legitimacy of The People’s Party. Revered historian Richard Hofstadter’s oft-cited and widely maligned 1965 work ‘The Age of Reform’ insisted the movement was not primarily fuelled by a fear of diminished autonomy, but by a deep-seated resentment and disillusionment over the erosion of social status, with many members gravitating towards conspiratorial ideations. Populism, in this sense, was inherently ‘dark’ for Hofstadter, as it was plagued by anti-Semitic conspiracy. Paranoia was at the crux of populism, which led Hofstadter in his later work to connect McCarthyism to this broader tradition of paranoia in the United States, its genesis found in the original People’s Party (Hofstadter, 1964). Populism was also soft, as, according to Hofstadter, it was grounded in a romanticised memory of the

nation's past, populists were thus incapacitated by "the hazy glow of the agrarian myth" (p. 7). This denigration of populism was subsequently labelled the "Hofstadter thesis".

This thesis, however, suffers from a glaring absence of primary source material or engagement, thereby undermining the credibility of his historical exegesis on the People's Party. In 'The Age of Reform', Hofstadter boldly claims "It is not too much to say that the Greenback-Populist tradition activated most of what we have of modern popular anti-Semitism" (1955, p. 78). This bold claim does not precede supporting evidence or substantive analysis. In a 1962 study, Jewish America historian Norman Pollack offered one of the most compelling repudiations of Hofstadter's accusations (Pollack, 1962). Pollack substantively showed that antisemitism, though it existed, was a negligible component in the broader movement, and the Populists were in fact more progressive than many other movements in nineteenth-century America. Furthermore, the claim the original populists were fundamentally revanchist, and populism was inexorably incapacitated by romanticised nostalgia, is not coherent when considering the Populists' emphasis on reform, progression and education. In his book, 'Democratic Promise: The Populist Movement in America' Lawrence Goodwyn offered a profound appraisal of the alliance of farmers and construction of the People's Party, proffering the movement was a radical, grassroots call for democracy (Goodwyn, 1976). As he famously observed, the farmers engaged in a mass experiment in democratic praxis, discovering in their banner of "cooperation and organisation" the rudiments of a new civic epistemology, seeking to restore agency through class solidarity and institutional reform (p. 16). This democratic praxis involved progressive campaigns for education, seeking to provide science and technology education to rural areas (Postel, 2007). Their goal to democratise the economy and revolt against monopolistic capitalism was one of progression and reform, not revanchism.

Hofstadter's excoriation of the People's Party was unequivocally a reflection of the cultural and political anxieties that pervaded the mid-twentieth century. Written at the zenith of McCarthyism, whereby Senator McCarthy's incendiary rhetoric and authoritarian impulses imperilled democratic discourse, Hofstadter's portrayal of populism appears deeply marred by his own trepidation toward the domestic threats posed by right-wing demagoguery. Michael Kazin, a prominent scholar of populism in the American tradition, echoes the aforementioned favourable assessments of the People's Party in his work 'The Populist Persuasion: An American History'. Kazin also cogently elucidates the irony palpable in the liberal elitist aporias that sought to denigrate populist movements. As he writes, the suspicion of mass democracy and "social movements of the ill-educated" contributed to the eventual crisis of liberalism which, ironically, engendered the ascendancy of right-wing populism in the second half of the 20th century (Kazin, 1998, p. 190).

Chapter Three: The Tea Party Movement

The Tea Party movement emerged as a reaction to the 2008 financial crisis, President Obama's election, and the subsequent policy decisions made by the administration. Rooted in right-wing populism, the middle-class movement channelled anger toward the federal government, framing its political identity around fiscal conservatism, limited government, and free market capitalism. As Lowndes (2017) elucidates, positive portraits of the Tea Party have described it as "a spontaneous people's movement that has come together to wrest power from corrupt elites" (p. 238). Initially

sparked by grassroots protests against anti-recessionary policies and the expanding state edifice, the movement calcified in 2009 through town hall disruptions protesting Obama's healthcare reform. Tea Party rhetoric against Obama had strong racial undertones, often suggesting Obama was un-American and propagating a corrosive conspiracy surrounding his place of birth. His policies, such as the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare), were frequently described as socialist or tyrannical, harnessing existing fears of government control and loss of individual freedoms. As Savage (2018) notes, "on a symbolic and discursive level... Obama's citizenship functioned to bolster the fear of a socialist conspiracy at home insofar as his 'uncertain' citizenship and religious faith added credence to the belief in the 'foreignness' of his administration's policies, e.g. 'ObamaCare.'" (p. 409).

While the Tea Party was presented as a grassroots movement, its organisational structure was far from spontaneous. Groups like FreedomWorks and Americans for Prosperity worked closely with Fox News to coordinate campaigns, fund protests, and craft messaging that would resonate with Tea Party supporters (Lowndes, 2017, p. 235). Fox News was instrumental in mediating the Tea Party's rise, as it acted not only as a source of information but also as a rallying point for the movement. Fox's strategy was one of emotional engagement, eliciting outrage, fear, and indignation. Through its pundits and commentary, Fox energised and mobilised its audience. The network's coverage of Tea Party events, from town hall disruptions to protests against Obama's policies, created active and affective participation, where viewers felt personally involved in a larger political struggle, heightening their emotional investment in the movement (Jutel, 2018, p. 250). It is indisputable that Fox News' platforming of Tea Party messaging, alongside the support of billionaire Koch brothers, catapulted the fiscally conservative movement into a powerful populist force of the 2010s.

Chapter Four: Democratic Renewal or Rupture:

To discern whether American populism constitutes a vehicle of democratic revitalisation or rupture, this analysis juxtaposes the discursive logics of the nineteenth-century People's Party and the contemporary Tea Party. Here, populism shall be considered a mode of political articulation where its ambivalence lies in its capacity to renew or erode democratic norms. By analysing each movement's construction of "the people," their adversarial imaginary of "the elite" and their orientation toward institutions, this analysis elucidates populism's dichotomous potential to either calcify or erode democratic norms and pluralism.

The People

In the United States Constitution, the popular will is foregrounded explicitly under the collective banner 'We the People', a phrase that enshrines the collective authority and democratic legitimacy of the citizenry within the foundational architecture of the republic (U.S. Constitution, 1787). The populist appeal to the demos is grounded in the perception of structural alienation from the polity and its mechanisms of self-rule. As Mair (2006) observes, in contemporary liberal democracies there has emerged "a version of democracy that is being steadily stripped of its popular component—democracy without a demos" (p.25). In this disjunction, populists thus legitimise their intervention, positing that the prevailing political establishment no longer commands the consent of the governed.

The rhetoric of the nineteenth-century People's Party illustrates a democratic imaginary and construction of the 'people' that is inclusive and egalitarian. William Jennings Bryan's famed "Cross of Gold" address at the 1896 Democratic National Convention exemplifies this paradigm: "We stand here representing people who are the equals before the law of the largest cities in the state of Massachusetts," he proclaimed, invoking a moral schema rooted in egalitarianism (Bryan, 1896). Likewise, Thomas E. Watson, a Southern populist whose political vision traversed the racial divide, espoused that poor Black and white farmers were "kept apart that [they] may be separately fleeced of [their] earnings" whereby "this race antagonism perpetuates a monetary system which beggars both," emphasising how racial antagonisms served to sustain a "financial despotism" (Watson, 1892b, in Woodward 1968, p. 220). The nineteenth century movements conception of the "people" was rooted in a capacious class-consciousness that sought to unify agrarian labourers and industrial workers across lines of industry and race.

In contrast to the inclusive, egalitarian imaginary of "the people" articulated by the People's Party of the nineteenth-century, the Tea Party's construction of "the people" is radically exclusionary, animated not by egalitarian aspirations but by a defensive, ethnonationalist and nativist logic. As Mudde (2007) defines, nativist logic asserts that the state should be reserved for the exclusive habitation of a native ethnocultural group, while casting all non-native persons, practices, and ideologies as existential threats to the nation's moral and demographic survival (p.19). This is discursively enforced on the Tea Party's official digital platforms, where existential warnings and moralised binaries construct an atmosphere of moral panic and fear. The capitalisation and language choice of "STOP THE ISLAMIC TAKEOVER OF OUR SCHOOLS!", as Raziei and Molek-Kozakowska (2022) argue, interpolates a homogenous national subject ("our schools," "our country") with an atmosphere of besiegement (p. 105). Specifically, they argue this "homogenises" the representation of Americans and "labels those who are not supporting the Tea Party as un-American and un-patriotic" (p. 105). Tea Party sentiment thus renders pluralism an existential threat, legitimating only one political worldview and expelling all others as inimical to national survival.

Interestingly, the boundary of belonging is not only drawn through race or nativism but through a moral economy of productivity. As Skocpol, Williamson, and Goggins (2011) observe, Tea Party members often distinguish themselves as "deserving" citizens who are legitimately entitled to state benefits such as Medicare and Social Security through their hard work (p. 26). Their study revealed "the distinction between "workers" and "people who don't work" is fundamental to Tea Party ideology on the ground", finding Tea Partiers resoundingly identified as "productive citizens." (p. 33) This is contrasted against a racialised and class-coded underclass presumed to parasitise government assistance. Here lies a pertinent divergence in the construction of the demos between the nineteenth-century People's Party and the Tea Party movement. The democratic imaginary is no longer the democracy of producers but a democracy of the productive. The latter is not anchored in a shared, tangible economic position but in a moralised and often invisible calculus of deservingness, rendering "the people" an affective and wholly exclusionary signifier.

The Elite

The figure of “the elite” occupies an invaluable position within all populist articulations, functioning as what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have theorised as the ‘constitutive outside’ of populist discourse (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In this schema, the elite is an ontological necessity and the antagonist in which the people are forged. Yet, the semantic contours of “the elite” vary profoundly across historical and ideological articulations of populism. The People's Party constructed its adversary in resolutely structural terms. The ‘elite’ was a concentrated nexus of financial capital and industrial monopolies. Arkansas populist W. Scott Morgan lamented the centripetal forces of economic power, warning of a burgeoning bifurcation of “land aristocracy on the one hand, and a mass of dependant tenants on the other” (Tindall, 1976, p. 18). In this vision, the elite is both systemically entrenched and corrupt, the apex of an exploitative architecture antithetical to democratic egalitarianism. This structuralist diagnosis engenders the impulse to redeem democracy by promoting egalitarianism and dismantling oligarchic hegemony.

Conversely, the Tea Party’s construction of the elite marks a shift from structural critique to moral condemnation, privileging affect over materialism. Here, elite antagonism operates within a cultural and moral prism. As Patricia Williams notes, figures like media personality and Tea Party advocate Glenn Beck enact a moralised dramaturgy of decline and redemption, framing the American polity as besieged by “traitors,” “socialists,” and “intellectual oligarchs” (Williams, 2010). These elites are betrayers of the authentic American national core. As Williams notes, Beck’s populist imaginary is animated by a reverse grievance politics in which “patriots” reclaim the moral high ground from a liberal-technocratic caste. Tea Party spokeswoman Sarah Palin’s dichotomy between “real Americans” and “cultural elites” further reinforces this axis of moral bifurcation, drawing a line between the instinctive virtue of the heartland and the un-Americanness of liberal elites (Savage, 2018, p. 406).

This moralised anti-elitism, as Panizza (2005) observes, enables right-wing populists to occupy the political stage while simultaneously discrediting it, offering a message of purity and “high moral grounding” contrasted against “the corruption and betrayal of the political establishment” (p. 23). Tea Party rhetoric displaces economic critique onto cultural antagonism, thereby obscuring the role of the super-wealthy and corporate actors in sustaining actual material hierarchies. The Tea Party’s populism thus engenders a democratic rupture, fracturing the public sphere into mutually unintelligible moral camps, foreclosing pluralism.

In contrast, the People’s Party’s structural populism gestured toward an expansive re-democratisation that would engender egalitarianism and popular will through anti-oligarchic principles, class-solidarity and economic redistribution. Their antagonism to elite domination was grounded in institutional and material analysis. By politicising entrenched hierarchies and foregrounding economic injustice, their discourse envisioned a reconstitution of the demos itself as an affirmative project of re-democratisation. As Michael Kazin (1998) argues, these contrasting modes reflect the bifurcation within the American populist tradition: one strand punches upward, against corporate and economic elites, aspiring for re-democratisation; the other, in its more reactionary form, punches outward and downward, projecting blame onto cultural elites and minorities.

Institutions and Reform

The populisms of the People's Party and the Tea Party constitute two radically divergent trajectories in the American democratic tradition: one a project of democratic renewal, the other a harbinger of democratic rupture. The People's Party populism was a project of radical democracy that sought to reconstruct the political order through participatory institutional reform. Far from indulging in revanchism, they laboured to construct new democratic capacities. As Theodore Mitchell (1987) noted, figures such as Southern Farmers Alliance leader Charles Macune embodied this ethos, translating agrarian grievances into "concrete proposals for reform" (p. 20). His Sub-Treasury Plan, most notably, was designed to democratise access to capital and market structures.

In stark contrast, the Tea Party's populism is best understood as revanchist, animated less by a vision of institutional reform than by a desire to reclaim a vanishing (and racialised) moral and cultural order. Tea Party members symbolically link their cause to American independence, invoking the image of a virtuous, aggrieved white middle class resisting state encroachment. Early rallies encouraged "revolutionary-era iconography and costume", wistfully invoking a period where women and minorities were disenfranchised (Lowndes, 2018, p. 196). The movement's mission was not to build new democratic institutions but to delegitimise existing ones through a vocabulary of betrayal, excess, and constitutional fundamentalism. On their official website, they write "The impetus for the Tea Party movement is excessive government spending and taxation", its aim to "mobilise our fellow citizens to secure public policy consistent with our three core values of Fiscal Responsibility, Constitutionally Limited Government, and Free Markets" (Tea Party Patriots, 2011). The Patriots cite these values as "derived from the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution... and the Bill of Rights as explained in the Federalist Papers". Despite professing fidelity to the Declaration of Independence and the Federalist Papers, the movement's webpage provides no link to any of these primary documents.

The Tea Party's discourse toward institutions is potent with affective polarisation. Barack Obama became the condensation symbol for existential anxieties, representing to many Tea Partiers not merely a political opponent but a threat to the American Republic. As Skocpol, Williamson, and Goggins (2011) document in their study, Obama's election was perceived as an existential rupture, with many concerned America was no longer the country of their youth (p. 34). Members saw the election of Obama as evidence that real America had been displaced by a multicultural, statist, and implicitly un-American regime. This sense of dislocation and racialised resentment engendered a populism that was truly revanchist, suspicious of others and hostile to the foundations of democracy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has elucidated that populism, understood as a discursive logic and mode of articulation, is marked by a protean character and inherent malleability that is susceptible to divergent appropriations. Whereas the People's Party aimed to universalise political agency through cooperative structures and education to promote egalitarianism, the Tea Party mobilised around a deeply exclusionary moral narrative that recoded economic and cultural anxieties. In the former, populism functioned as a vernacular of democratic expansion, committed to institutional reform to embody true egalitarianism. In the latter, populism became a vehicle for resentment, cloaked in libertarian idiom

but driven by nativist logic yearning for cultural homogeneity. Tea Party rhetoric lamented pluralism an existential threat, legitimating only one political worldview and expelling all others as inimical to national survival. Thus, while both movements claim the mantle of “the people,” only the People’s Party sought was a project of democratic renewal. The Tea Party, by contrast, espoused a populism of anti-pluralism and institutional nihilism, revealing the perilous edge where populist rhetoric can promote democratic erosion.

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