

## The New Populism

John Richards

Volume 23, 1989

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/11t23re05>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

### ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

Richards, J. (1989). The New Populism. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 23, 263–268.

# The New Populism

John Richards

Harry C. Boyte and Frank Riessman, eds., *The New Populism: The Politics of Empowerment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1986).

Harry C. Boyte, Heather Booth, and Steve Max, *Citizen Action and the New American Populism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1986).

Daniel A. Foss and Ralph Larkin, *Beyond Revolution* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey 1986).

STUDS TERKEL. WRITING IN *THE NEW POPULISM*, calls himself a populist:

I call myself a populist. It avoids the goddamn liberal label. Radical means get to the root of things. Conservative means to conserve .... So I call myself a radical conservative. I want to get to the roots of things .... Populism is taking part in your community. Populism is in the best interest of a great many people, if they can determine what their best interests are .... Populism can go both ways. It's not always good. It can also be racist. Tom Watson became a racist. Richard Viguerie [fundraiser for New Right causes] uses the word. (111-12, 114)

Studs Terkel is a brilliant journalist. But as a definition of populism the above is pretty vague stuff. Originally, populists were simply supporters of the People's Party, a protest party that enjoyed massive, if short-lived, success among farmers and workers in the South and West of the United States at the climax of the agrarian revolt in the 1890s. By now, however, use of the expression extends to a vast and amorphous range of politicians and their organizations. Tommy Douglas is a populist; so too, it has been argued, are Bible Bill Aberhart, Mao Zedong, Juan Peron, Jimmy Carter, and Congressman Jack Kemp. Faced with such imprecision — and academics can be as vague as Studs Terkel — it is tempting to dismiss the term populism as meaningless. Should we do so?

Boyte and his collaborators passionately disagree — and, with a few more qualifications than they would allow, so do I. Populism has an undeniable meaning in ordinary language usage. Political movements and ideas are “populist” to the extent they display a strong faith in the “common man’s” virtues, in the ability of ordinary people to act together politically despite potentially serious class, racial,

John Richards, “The New Populism,” *Labour/Le Travail* 23 (Spring 1989), 263-267.

regional, or religious cleavages among them. Populist movements argue that concentrated political and economic institutions wield unwarranted power and, as a corollary, demand decentralization of economic and political power to the "people," either as individuals or as represented in regional and local governments. It is important to realize that populism can be either a left or right wing phenomenon, the former concentrating on the corporate abuse of power, the latter on the abuse of power by "big government."

It is probably useful to distinguish between four somewhat compartmentalized types of populist experience. First is the populism manifest in the many agrarian protest movements organized in both Canada and the United States, of which the People's Party was the prototype. Second is the nineteenth-century movement among Russian intellectuals (Narodism) that extolled the communal values of the traditional Russian peasantry. Third are certain authoritarian regimes, such as Peron's in Argentina, whose leadership has aligned itself with the common people and in opposition to some alternative disparaged elite. Finally, there are contemporary political organizations and leaders who, in varying degrees, attempt to win support by appealing to the shared interests of the people, interests allegedly flouted by powerfully organized "vested interests" and traditional "old-line" politicians.

The reader may still feel that populism remains a disconcertingly nebulous idea. Before the reader comes to any definitive conclusion, I invite you to attempt a quick definition of a term such as "liberalism," being sure to explain the essential shared ideas between the Manchester school of nineteenth-century free trade economists, New Deal liberalism in the US and, say, the liberalism of Claude Ryan and John Turner.

To understand the appeal of populism to many of the writers in the books under review it helps to review the fate of North American left-wing activists formed in the high tide of New Left politics. As the tide receded in the 1970s, many opted out of politics altogether: some became pragmatic reformists working within unions and the left-wing of the Democratic Party (in the US), the NDP (in anglophone Canada) or the Parti Québécois (in Quebec). Among the academically inclined, another option was a retreat to scholastic Marxism. Marxism permitted former activists to find solace from a politically depressing reality in the study of grand theory: the certainties of Leninism and the opaque semantic distinctions of French structuralism. The result has been a proliferation of turgid tomes devoid of empirical substance.

Although Foss and Larkin argue a romantic anarchist thesis that could transcend scholastic Marxism, *Beyond Revolution* utterly fails to do so and becomes instead a depressing example of the genre. They despair that the liberating ecstasy of community to be found at the height of a social movement inevitably yields to routine. History, for Foss and Larkin, tragically cycles between periods of social quiescence and revolt. Men and women liberate themselves from oppression through social movements which, however, are unable to "get things done." The needs of society dictate that "the animals are herded back into their cages —

freshly painted ones. perhaps, but cages nevertheless — where they are coerced into ‘getting things done’.” (103)

If the authors were less intent on belittling non-Marxist psychological, economic or philosophical insights, they could have written an interesting book. They insist, unfortunately, on dragging the reader into the hall of mirrors of contemporary Marxist jargon. They propose three “laws” — the “law of mounting stakes,” “the law of emerging contradiction,” “the law of shifting terrain” — that are either so vague as to be meaningless, or restatements of ideas long known by writers as diverse as Trotsky and Machiavelli. The real virtue of this volume is the authors’ explicit modesty: “We wish we could identify the rebels of tomorrow and tell you how they will do it. We do not have the slightest idea.” (158) If the authors had written these lines as their opening as opposed to their concluding paragraph, the reader would be forewarned, spared the pain of deciphering prose that, at its worst, degenerates into convoluted sentences half a page in length. Anyone who perseveres to page 87 will there find a sentence which begins: “The mental life of bourgeois society thereby reproduced the mind-body dichotomy found in all class societies in the usual relations of relative prestige ....,” and continues in like manner for 20 lines.

Boyte represents an altogether different response to the receding New Left tide. In earlier writings he has criticized the flight from “here and now” entailed in the rise of scholastic Marxism, and stressed that left-wing politics be rooted in the sense of local community that ordinary people actually understand and articulate. There are difficulties with Boyte’s approach to which I shall return, but after a bookfull of cosmopolitan Marxist smog it liberates the spirit like a spring day in the prairies.

The thesis argued in *Citizen Action* is that American conservatism radicalized itself in the 1960s and 1970s, becoming imbued with right-wing populism. Instead of defending the status quo, its leaders increasingly called for radical changes to strengthen the family and traditional morality, to liberalize markets, to “privatize” public services, to decentralize government. “Conversely,” Boyte *et al.* argue, “the liberals shifted from being outsiders to being government’s principal defenders.” (13) To make headway the left must itself adopt a populist style. The bulk of the book illustrates what they identify as the emergence of a new “progressive populism:” for example, union leaders and environmentalists combining to oppose nuclear power, the emergence of a Populist Caucus in the US Congress led by Tom Harkin, an articulate senator from Iowa; the growth of Citizen Action, a nationwide federation of grass-roots community organizations in the United States. The tone is unambiguously that of the committed participant, not the dispassionate analyst.

*Citizen Action* is a useful anti-depressant for those who conceive US politics as a conservative monolith devoid of democratic life on the left. It will frustrate those seeking to analyze dispassionately populist “theory” (if such is not too ambitious an epithet) and its practical potential. For that purpose *The New Populism*

is the more useful book, although even here Boyte does not vigorously pursue the difficulties of combining populist politics with the exigencies of "getting things done" which imply a minimum of rational bureaucratic order.

*The New Populism* is a collection of twenty-four brief essays by a range of academics, journalists, politicians, and community organizers. Inevitably in a collection of this size the level is uneven. Elizabeth Minnich's article on feminism and populism should, for example, have been cut. She fears that populist style of politics co-opts women and recreates the sexism of the "old days." Does it? Maybe yes, maybe no. But Minnich gives no evidence; she merely pontificates from the pulpit of feminist theory. Overall, however, the book succeeds in putting the populist's case — democratic politics can work; ordinary people are capable of working collectively to achieve significant goals; literate, honest politicians do get elected in the United States. The book also touches upon, if it does not delve into, the limits of populism.

For reasons of space I must selectively sample. *The New Populism* includes some fine political rhetoric from "new populist" politicians such as Baltimore Congresswoman Barbara Mikulski and Jim Hightower, Texas Commission of Agriculture:

... a farmer friend of mine came in and said, "Hell, Hightower, there's nothing in the middle of the road but yellow stripes and dead armadillos. We want you out there fighting for us ...." And that's not just a few people who feel like that, it is not just labor, it's not just poor folks, it's not just minority, environmentalist, Volvo-driving liberals; I contend it is the American majority, including the dirt farmer and the hard-scrabble rancher, including the Main Street business person, the entrepreneur, the nurses and the keypunchers, the waitresses and the clerks. Not just the beansprout-eaters but the snuff-dippers in this society as well, have this kind of feeling. (242)

Manning Marable eloquently discusses black democratic aspirations, interweaving his argument with the story of his great grandfather, who was born a slave, who in the crest of Populist success in the 1890s enjoyed black and white support and won election as sheriff in his Alabama county, who subsequently became disgusted after decades of Jim Crow and voted Republican. Lawrence Goodwyn opens the book with a call for "democratic spaces" where people can learn to be other than passive consumers and workers in a corporate economy. This article illustrates clearly the intellectual debt Goodwyn owes to E.P. Thompson's approach to working-class history in England. Goodwyn's massive history of rural co-operation culminating in the People's Party (*The Populist Moment*) has become the bible among those attempting to resuscitate the left populist style in American politics — not only among academics but, as Senator Harkin insists in his contribution to this volume, among practising politicians.

The virtue of populism is to take local democracy seriously, to insist that ordinary people can "get things done." But only the truly romantic anarchist can believe in a society without impersonal market transactions and central bureaucracy. Hicks, in his classic and sympathetic study of American populism

written in the 1930s, faced up squarely to the poor administrative performance of populists-led state administrations. Admittedly their conservative, business-led opponents engaged in acts of "destabilization," but it is not enough to emphasize external opposition. Populist leaders, both in rhetoric and in practice, consistently failed to appreciate the internal problems of public administration. Several of the contributions introduce this theme. Cornel West (in a piece entitled "Populism: a Black Socialist Critique") makes the point effectively: "The imprecise [populist] message of decentralization tends to overlook crucial issues of productivity, efficiency, and the inescapable presence of some forms of centralization .... [T]he slippery conception of democracy indeed serves as a desirable standard to criticize present societal realities, but it remains unclear what positive and constructive content it possesses." (210)

The patron saint of American populists has always been Thomas Jefferson. As the author of the Declaration of Independence he early proved his capacity for progressive rhetoric, but he also mastered the administrative intricacies of running a successful presidency. Boyte and his colleagues would be well advised to take more seriously the practical conclusions on which he settled as elder statesman. He remained an unreconstructed believer in popular participation: "the whole is cemented by giving to every citizen, personally, a part in the administration of the public affairs." But he simultaneously espoused ideas that are closer to contemporary public choice economists than to the left. "In government, as well as in any other business of life, it is by division and subdivision alone, that all matters, great and small, can be managed to perfection" (both quotes contained in a letter from Jefferson to Kercheval, 12 July 1816). In contrast to the traditional left argument for a strong central state to realize the general will, he argued for "states' rights," for decentralized authority that, to use the public choice jargon, "internalizes" the costs and benefits of public policy within local governments. Boyte may agree with the principle of decentralization. Does he accept the corollary of limited central jurisdiction and financial accountability of local government? As an aside, Jefferson entertained the currently unpopular view among those on the left of judicial review as an elitist substitute for popular democracy.

In conclusion, I agree with Boyte and his collaborators that any serious attempt to improve the quality of democracy in North America must be rooted in the "here and now" of local conditions and build on indigenous culture traditions of radical populism. That is a lesson that the more xenophobic left-wing Canadian nationalists should take to heart. Much that is democratic in Canadian political history springs from populist movements whose influence moved freely — in both directions — across the 49th parallel. However, I caution Boyte to move beyond a lawyer's case for populism and attempt to marry it with the social democratic tradition of efficient public administration. Occasionally, as in the early CCF administration of Saskatchewan or the early years of the Parti Québécois government in Quebec, the marriage works well. But, like any good marriage, it is not easy.

# New Maritimes

*A Regional Magazine of Politics and Culture*



**The independent  
regional bi-monthly  
that covers the  
politics and culture of  
the Maritimes from a  
fresh, alternate  
perspective.**

## *Subscribe Today !*

**In Canada \$15/yr. Outside Canada \$25/yr.**

Mail cheque or money order to: *New Maritimes*  
Enfield, Nova Scotia  
B0N 1N0

Now in its eighth year, *New Maritimes* has earned numerous regional and national awards for investigative journalism. These include the 1986 Goodwin's Award for Excellence in Alternative Journalism in Canada and the more mainstream Atlantic Journalism Award for the year's best magazine article in 1986, and again in 1988. *New Maritimes* comes from the critical left, but without the dogma. A unique adventure in radical regionalism.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Postal Code \_\_\_\_\_



L/T