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**Mike Miller**

## POPULIST PROMISES AND PROBLEMS

### **Democratic Populism's Themes**

Democratic populism points us in several important directions: (1) Wealth and power are concentrated in the hands of too few people, particularly those at the helm of major business and governmental institutions. (2) The capacity of average people to define their own problems and to come up with solutions to them should be understood as central to a vision of a democratic future in America, as well as to an understanding of its revolutionary past. (3) If we are to successfully challenge concentrated wealth and power, we need to begin by building and strengthening autonomous organizations and institutions that are deeply rooted in the experiences and values of people in local communities.

To reclaim our democratic heritage is simple but not easy. This is another of the pointers of democratic populism. In an age that emphasizes

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complexity and the need for experts to solve all problems, populism is a proper antidote. It can take us beyond policy debates that are indeed complex and complicated and point us toward the need to organize. It suggests that to engage in policy debate without the power to be a player at the decision-making table is either the stuff of cruel illusion or coffee-house chatter. It further reminds us that when the noncredentialed have had the power to determine solutions to social and economic problems, there was a rich inventiveness in their programs. It suggests to intellectuals and activists that they must develop a connectedness to the struggles of local people and organizing if they want to find an opportunity to connect policy and program with people. As a friend of mine puts it, you've got to earn the right to meddle. Leadership is earned, not claimed.

### **Some Populist Problems**

The new interest in populism is not without its problems. It is, after all, a slogan that has been adopted by a very strange assortment of bedfellows: many of the participants in this anthology—and Richard Viguerie and Ronald Reagan. Those who breathe a 1980s content into the slogan will, with exceptions to be noted below, be those with the power to do so—namely, those who define the news media's presentation of reality and those who now are centrally situated in positions of power in America.

As a slogan for our times, democratic populism *may* make enemies it does not want and exclude allies it needs. Racial and ethnic minorities are, at least in my experience, relatively suspicious of the new populism. So, too, are many involved in the labor, women's, and environmental movements. The problem is not solved by calling everything we think is good and appropriate for our times "populist." The fact is that ideas are both formers and expressions of movements and organizations. If those expressing the idea today are largely Anglo, college-educated whites, then instead of being something that unifies a new majority, "democratic populism" will go the way of "participatory democracy," a once vital idea that never got beyond the social base of its exponents.

Populist rhetoric today appears to be limited to an electoral arena. With the exception of those places where the historic memory of the Populist movement still lives, local members and leaders of powerful organizations that might do something about the inequities of our time

simply do not call themselves populists. The idea is not organically connected to the richness of hundreds of serious local and regional organizing efforts that are taking place both around work and in neighborhoods.

Last, though the list could continue, the idea could go the way of any number of new slogans debated in journals and magazines ranging from the center to the left: the search for the "real" populism will assume that some metaphysical populism exists. The discussion and debate over it will miss one of its historic points—that powerful ideas need to be rooted in powerful movements and organizations.

### **Where to Find Today's Populist Spirit**

The populist impulse should make us look at what kinds of organizations and institutions are appropriate for our time to enable us to resist the continuing encroachment on our freedoms by the mega-institutions. We should be looking at the labor movement and what is going on there; we should be looking at broadly based community organizations and what is happening within them; we should be looking in the religious institutions of America to see how they are doing as a source of resistance and articulation of differing visions from those exemplified by J. R. Ewing and other advocates of greed.

We should be encouraged by the fact that Lane Kirkland and the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO have recently published a self-critical analysis with the idea that there are new things that the labor movement should consider if it is to renew itself. Similarly, we should be encouraged by such developments as the recent Machinists Union contract in which union members are now doing work that previously was done by a layer of supervisory personnel, by the Toledo Teacher's Union agreement with their school district in which teacher union representatives will participate with management in quality of teaching review, by the takeover of inner-city food stores in Philadelphia by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union local there.

Note that in any of these cases it is not only what is being done but also who is doing it that is important. Unions are the only vehicle that workers now have to defend and advance their interests across the board in the American economy. With the exception of a few unions in which you might take your life in your hands to mount an opposition to the

incumbent's campaign, the unions are responsive and democratic institutions. Innovative managers are doing many of the things that are involved in the Teacher Union and Machinists examples. There are many examples of worker ownership as well. Neither of these, however, offers the promise of making a significant impact on the power relations of the country. Things that change how the labor union defines itself will.

A populist orientation at the workplace would have unionists increasing their challenge of management prerogatives, demanding more involvement of workers in issues having to do with the appropriateness, quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of what is produced or served. It would have workers, through their elected representatives, having a say in investment decisions, relocation decisions, and other areas now considered the sole prerogative of management. The focus, then, is not primarily on getting an international president to be the sole dissenting voice on the board of directors of a corporation or, for that matter, on the formality of "co-determination." Where neither changes the real relations of power, little results. This is precisely what is the matter with many of the employees' stock ownership plan, or ESOP, buy-outs: workers formally own, but there is no real change in who controls.

The orientation toward the building of counterinstitutions and power gives us a new way of understanding worker ownership and producer and consumer co-ops as well. That these can be built and that they can work is only partially the point. David Thompson, director of international relations of the Cooperative League of the USA, puts it well: "Cooperative housing is strongest where development has been centralized and projects decentralized. Norway, Sweden and Germany have successfully created over a million units of cooperative housing through their central cooperative housing organizations. For us (in the U.S.), every cooperative housing development is almost always an independent, single entity destined to play no future role in helping others, or in building a housing cooperative movement." The result is interesting "models" but no general impact.

In religious congregations across the land a renewal of the concern of the Judeo-Christian tradition for social and economic justice is taking place. Important for our point here is that this concern manifests itself in a pastoral way as well as a prophetic one. That is, it is based on concern for the people of the congregation in their own lives as well as a call on the people of the congregation to reach out to others. This linking of vision and self-interest, of broad values and immediate concerns, is at the heart of what is happening in these religious settings. The phenomenon is one

qualitatively different from that of middle class religious activists being involved in a range of issues that make up the "progressive" or "liberal" agenda.

Congregations led by those looking at people, power, politics and values are now contesting the new right for leadership on issues that were snubbed by liberal cosmopolitanism: crime, neighborhood safety, pornography. At the same time, these congregations are dealing with issues of employment, quality of education, affordable housing, toxic wastes and so on.

### **The Broadly Based Community Organization**

The context for much that is hopeful in America today is the broadly based, multi-issue, multiconstituency, democratic community organization. Such organizations now exist in too few communities—and the organizers who can build them are relatively small in number. But both organizations and organizers are a growing phenomenon, and the results of these organizations' efforts are gaining increasing attention. The characteristics of these organizations may be summarized as follows:

- The organization is rooted in local tradition, leadership, and people.
- The organization's practice is guided by the values of the democratic tradition.
- The organization recognizes the importance of self-interest as a source of energy and motivation for its participants.
- The program of the organization arises out of the local people themselves.
- The organization has the support of the majority of the people of the constituency for which it claims or seeks to speak.
- The organization involves a substantial degree of individual participation. It is characterized by a constant day-to-day flow of volunteer activities and the daily functioning of numerous local committees charged with specific short-term functions.
- The organization emphasizes the functional relationship between problems and therefore its program is multi-issue, and it seeks to relate to others similarly situated in other communities.
- The organization avoids circumscribed and segmental approaches to the solution of the problems of the community.

□ The organization recognizes that a democratic society is one that responds to popular pressures, and therefore realistically operates on the basis of pressure. For the same reason, it does not shy away from involvement in matters of controversy.

□ The organization concentrates on the utilization of indigenous individuals who, if not leaders at the beginning, can be developed into leaders.

□ The organization gives priority to the significance of two major sources of human motivation: deeply felt values and self-interest. The organization proceeds on the idea of channeling the many diverse forces of self-interest within the community into a common direction for the common good. It emphasizes the values of the democratic tradition and the particular culture of various groups of people as guideposts for settling disputes among the people. By values we mean: liberty, equality, community, love, mutual respect, dignity, and so forth.

□ The organization recognizes and respects the autonomy and diversity of individuals and organizations.

□ The organization is or becomes self-financed through direct dues and membership participation in fundraising activities. This testifies to its representative character in that the local community supports its organization financially, ensures to the membership the accountability of its paid staff, and guarantees the financial independence of the organization.

Much of this summary is adapted from a statement written by Saul Alinsky in July 1955.

### **Activities of Broadly Based or Mass Organizations**

The activities of these broadly based community organizations include:

- winning and enforcing victories on particular issues;
- encouraging and strengthening voluntary associations and mutual aid activities;
- bringing together on a basis of mutual respect diverse groups that have historically been antagonists—victims of their own parochialism as well as tactics of divide and conquer used against them;
- providing opportunities for leadership training and development;

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- deepening an appreciation of the values of the democratic and Judeo-Christian traditions by combining action with reflection;
- educating themselves (meaning their members and constituents) about the problems and issues of our time.

In a number of places these organizations have participated in the electoral process. They have understood such participation as a tactic—one of the means by which to build the kind of popular organization necessary to defend and advance the interests and values of their members within the broader framework of democratic and religious values that underlie our nation. Even the most powerful of these organizations are wary of becoming the tail on a candidate's kite.

### **The Heart of Populism**

Note, then, that what may be called a "populist" organization and program emerges from patiently constructed, from-the-bottom-up organizations. Note also that to look at specific issue "accomplishments" or specific programmatic ideas is to focus on only one part of the picture. The entire picture is one of building the counterinstitutions and organizations that can enable us to deal powerfully with those who now wield power. In our century the CIO, the Non-Partisan League, and the Montgomery Improvement Association probably provide us with the best historic examples of this possibility.

### **The Battle of Democratic Versus Elitist Ideas**

An important role to be played in the recovery of America's democratic past is that of challenging opinion shapers and makers about their ideas. The major antidemocratic impulses in American life can be traced to two ideas: (1) The protection of individual and minority rights is more assured if power is in the hands of elites—the more educated and sophisticated. (2) The people "at the top," those who "run things," know better than most of us how to make our society more effective and efficient. They are more qualified to make decisions than are most people.

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Most of our dominant institutions are organized to protect and enhance these ideas.

For democratic populism to become a reality we need historians who will write more about what average people did and less about what elites did, journalists to find out more about what's going on in neighborhoods and less of what politicians are saying, political philosophers who will ask more about what Jefferson had in mind when he talked about the importance of the yeoman farmer and less about how Jeffersonian ideals do not fit in high-tech, urban America, schoolteachers who will more often point out how local residents organizing to fight toxic-waste dumps are like the American revolutionaries and who are less tied to the bland civics of most texts, labor educators who will more often celebrate working-class history and culture and less often present labor history to workers as simply the story of an alternative set of "great men."

### **An Emerging Movement in America Today**

A powerful new movement to reclaim democracy is emerging today in America. It is built on the basic values of liberty, justice, equality, and community. It also claims the traditional values of family, religion, neighborhood, work, and national pride. It needs a richer language to distinguish itself from dominant cultural themes of material success, "me-first" and America first, private (corporate) enterprise as the guarantor of economic progress. Whether democratic populism can provide that language is the challenge facing its proponents.

The organizing task for populist intellectuals (people of ideas) is to bring a different language and perspective to bear in their professional organizations as well as in America's major cultural institutions. Pacific News Service has been pioneering this method of news reporting. Teacher union locals could be testifying before school district curriculum committees for supplemental texts. Media unions could publicly criticize the Archie Bunker images of working people. Historians, political scientists, psychologists, sociologists, and others could challenge "great men" theories of history. Theologians and clergy can emphasize the missionary and evangelist in each member of a congregation. Labor educators and writers can help workers tell the story of today's workplace—perhaps not the

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dungeon of yesterday's mine, but a place with its own degradations of the human mind and spirit.

My first organizing experience was in an anti-urban renewal fight in San Francisco. While most city planners, urban sociologists, and architects argued before political bodies, wrote policy papers for commissions and candidates, debated ideas in professional and learned journals, there were a few who met with the resident leaders of our anti-urban renewal coalition and patiently described how they could have a voice in the renewal of their own neighborhood. Not only did they offer their skills to people who were not sure that what they were doing was possible, they also offered ideas that added a clarity to what the people wanted. "Downtown" was portraying the local group as "selfishly" interested—and not looking out for the good of the city as a whole. The planners, politicians, and editorial pundits counterposed their own concern for "the city as a whole" to the "narrow interests" of local residents. What our little band of intellectual allies provided was both technical expertise and moral justification for the popular struggle. Residents, local business people, and local institutional leaders (congregations, fraternal and civic associations, the elderly, and other groups) discovered that their concerns could be articulated as a vision of the good city. They also discovered that those who were their adversaries just might have been serving the interests of the developers and downtown money and that their vision of the city was probably the more selfish one.

The creation of this kind of public self-confidence on the part of the vast majority of Americans is one of the most important tasks of our time. It is something to which the new populism may make a great contribution.

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# ECONOMIC AND PROGRAMMATIC ISSUES