

Anti-Populism: Ideology of the Ruling Class

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Introduction

Throughout the US and European corporate and state media, right and left, we are told that '*populism*' has become the overarching threat to democracy, freedom and . . . free markets. The media's '*anti-populism*' campaign has been used and abused by ruling elites and their academic and intellectual camp followers as the principal weapon to distract, discredit and destroy the rising tide of mass discontent with ruling class-imposed austerity programs, the accelerating concentration of wealth and the deepening inequalities.

We will begin by examining the conceptual manipulation of '*populism*' and its multiple usages. Then we will turn to the historic economic origins of populism and anti-populism. Finally, we will critically analyze the contemporary movements and parties dubbed '*populist*' by the ideologues of '*anti-populism*'.

Conceptual Manipulation

In order to understand the current ideological manipulation accompanying '*anti-populism*' it is necessary to examine the historical roots of populism as a popular movement.

Populism emerged during the 19th and 20th century as an ideology, movement and government in opposition to autocracy, feudalism, capitalism, imperialism and socialism. In the United States, populist leaders led agrarian struggles backed by millions of small farmers in opposition to bankers, railroad magnates and land speculators. Opposing monopolistic practices of the 'robber barons', the populist movement supported broad-based commercial agriculture, access to low interest farm credit and reduced transport costs.

In 19th century Russia, the populists opposed the Tsar, the moneylenders and the burgeoning commercial elites.

In early 20th century India and China, populism took the form of nationalist agrarian movements seeking to overthrow the imperial powers and their comprador collaborators.

In Latin America, from the 1930s onward, especially with the crises of export regimes, Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia and Peru, embraced a variety of populist, anti-imperialist governments. In Brazil, President Getulio Vargas's term (1937-1964) was notable for the establishment of a national industrial program promoting the interests of urban industrial workers despite banning independent working class trade unions and Marxist parties. In Argentina, President Juan Peron's first terms (1946-1954) promoted large-scale working class organization, advanced social welfare programs and embraced nationalist capitalist development.

In Bolivia, a worker-peasant revolution brought to power a nationalist party, the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (MNR), which nationalized the tin mines, expropriated the latifundios and promoted national development during its rule from 1952-1964.

In Peru, under President Velasco Alvarado (1968-1975), the government expropriated the coastal sugar plantations and US oil fields and copper mines while promoting worker and agricultural cooperatives.

In all cases, the populist governments in Latin America were based on a coalition of nationalist capitalists, urban workers and the rural poor. In some notable cases, nationalist military officers brought populist governments to power. What they had in common was their opposition to foreign capital and its local supporters and exporters ('compradores'), bankers and their elite military collaborators. Populists promoted 'third way' politics by opposing imperialism on the right, and socialism and communism on the left. The populists supported the

redistribution of wealth but not the expropriation of property. They sought to reconcile national capitalists and urban workers. They opposed class struggle but supported state intervention in the economy and import-substitution as a development strategy.

Imperialist powers were the leading anti-populists of that period. They defended property privileges and condemned nationalism as ‘authoritarian’ and undemocratic. They demonized the mass support for populism as ‘a threat to Western Christian civilization’. Not infrequently, the anti-populists ideologues would label the national-populists as ‘fascists’ . . . even as they won numerous elections at different times and in a variety of countries.

The historical experience of populism, in theory and practice, has nothing to do with what today’s ‘*anti-populists*’ in the media are calling ‘*populism*’. In reality, current *anti-populism* is still a continuation of anti-communism, a political weapon to disarm working class and popular movements. It advances the class interest of the ruling class. Both ‘anti’s’ have been orchestrated by ruling class ideologues seeking to blur the real nature of their ‘pro-capitalist’ privileged agenda and practice. Presenting your program as ‘pro-capitalist’, pro-inequalities, pro-tax evasion and pro-state subsidies for the elite is more difficult to defend at the ballot box than to claim to be ‘*anti-populist*’.

‘*Anti-populism*’ is the simple ruling class formula for covering-up their real agenda, which is pro-militarist, pro-imperialist (globalization), pro-‘rebels’ (i.e. mercenary terrorists working for regime change), pro crisis makers and pro-financial swindlers.

The economic origins of ‘*anti-populism*’ are rooted in the deep and repeated crises of capitalism and the need to deflect and discredit mass discontent and demoralize the popular classes in struggle. By demonizing ‘*populism*’, the elites seek to undermine the rising tide of

anger over the elite-imposed wage cuts, the rise of low-paid temporary jobs and the massive increase in the reserve army of cheap immigrant labor to compete with displaced native workers.

Historic ‘anti-populism’ has its roots in the inability of capitalism to secure popular consent via elections. It reflects their anger and frustration at their failure to grow the economy, to conquer and exploit independent countries and to finance growing fiscal deficits.

The Amalgamation of Historical Populism with the Contemporary Fabricated *Populism*

What the current anti-populists ideologues label ‘*populism*’ has little to do with the historical movements.

Unlike all of the past populist governments, which sought to nationalize strategic industries, none of the current movements and parties, denounced as ‘populist’ by the media, are anti-imperialists. In fact, the current ‘*populists*’ attack the lowest classes and defend the imperialist-allied capitalist elites. The so-called current ‘*populists*’ support imperialist wars and bank swindlers, unlike the historical populists who were anti-war and anti-bankers.

Ruling class ideologues simplistically conflate a motley collection of rightwing capitalist parties and organizations with the pro-welfare state, pro-worker and pro-farmer parties of the past in order to discredit and undermine the burgeoning popular multi-class movements and regimes.

Demonization of independent popular movements ignores the fundamental programmatic differences and class politics of genuine populist struggles compared with the contemporary right-wing capitalist political scarecrows and clowns.

One has only to compare the currently demonized ‘*populist*’ Donald Trump with the truly populist US President Franklin Roosevelt, who promoted social welfare, unionization, labor rights, increased taxes on the rich, income redistribution, and genuine health and workplace

safety legislation within a multi-class coalition to see how absurd the current media campaign has become.

The *anti-populist* ideologues label President Trump a ‘populist’ when his policies and proposals are the exact opposite. Trump champions the repeal of all pro-labor and work safety regulation, as well as the slashing of public health insurance programs while reducing corporate taxes for the ultra-elite.

The media’s ‘*anti-populists*’ ideologues denounce pro-business rightwing racists as ‘*populists*’. In Italy, Finland, Holland, Austria, Germany and France anti-working class parties are called ‘*populist*’ for attacking immigrants instead of bankers and militarists.

In other words, the key to understanding contemporary ‘*anti-populism*’ is to see its role in preempting and undermining the emergence of authentic populist movements while convincing middle class voters to continue to vote for crisis-prone, austerity-imposing neo-liberal regimes. ‘*Anti-populism*’ has become the opium (or OxyContin) of frightened middle class voters.

The anti-populism of the ruling class serves to confuse the ‘right’ with the ‘left’; to sidelight the latter and promote the former; to amalgamate rightwing ‘rallies’ with working class strikes; and to conflate rightwing demagogues with popular mass leaders.

Unfortunately, too many leftist academics and pundits are loudly chanting in the ‘anti-populist’ chorus. They have failed to see themselves among the shock troops of the right. The left ideologues join the ruling class in condemning the corporate populists in the name of ‘anti-fascism’. Leftwing writers, claiming to ‘*combat the far-right enemies of the people*’, overlook the fact that they are ‘fellow-travelling’ with an anti-populist ruling class, which has imposed savage cuts in living standards, spread imperial wars of aggression resulting in millions of desperate refugees--*not immigrants* --and concentrated immense wealth.

The bankruptcy of today's '*anti-populist*' left will leave them sitting in their coffee shops, scratching at fleas, as the mass popular movements take to the streets!