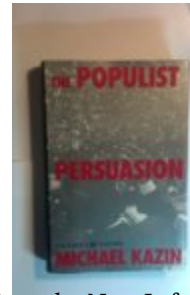


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael Kazin. *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*. New York: Basic Books, 1995. x + 381 pp. \$24.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-03793-3.

Reviewed by Seth M. Wigderson (University of Maine at Augusta)
Published on H-Labor (June, 1995)



Michael Kazin's *The Populist Persuasion* is a useful, perceptive work, occasionally illuminated by flashes of brilliant insight. His study of populist rhetoric across a century of U.S. history provides today's political activists with a rich legacy of the language of popular struggle. Inevitably in work of such originality, there are also some real shortcomings. In particular, his narrative is often flawed by a tendency to use linguistic analysis to evade politics.

Kazin is a well known historian whose work, **The Barons of Labor**, showed how San Francisco's once victorious labor party ultimately succumbed to the cross-class Progressive movement. Kazin is also a prolific reviewer and essayist. Last spring, he and fellow historian Maurice Isserman defended Bill Clinton against Clinton's left critics in a series of spirited articles in *The Nation*.

In **The Populist Persuasion**, Kazin takes on a challenging task— to trace the uses of populist rhetoric from the 1890's till today. Motivated by a desire to explain the decline of the liberal Left and the rise of a new Right, he avails himself of the postmodern "linguistic turn," which grants language more autonomy than I find comfortable. He uses rhetorical analysis to study an oft repeated style of American politics made famous by the Populist Party of the 1890s. Rooted in a patriotic Americanism, this language posits a nation of hardworking producers, independent and self-reliant, who are threatened by a non-producing elite, "a morbid growth on an otherwise healthy and democratic body politic," which then requires a strong peoples' movement to restore the Nation's well-being.

Kazin shows the adaptability of this language in a series of fine studies of the Populist Party, the American Federation of Labor, the Prohibitionists, Father Cough-

lin, the C.I.O., postwar Anti-Communism, the New Left, George Wallace, and the New Right. He demonstrates the power of populist imagery to successfully rally supporters from AFL sponsored Labor Days to George Wallace's slashing attacks on "limousine liberals." He shows the ever present potential of mass resentment by a disgruntled Many against an overbearing Few. Kazin does not let his own sympathies detract from a careful and nuanced reading of conservatives from the Anti-Saloon League to Ronald Reagan.

He is aware of the self-limiting nature of populist language. Its evocation of that "morbid growth," implies that the essential health of the system can be restored when the People excise the hated monopolists, liquor interests, secular humanists, etc. Yet he loses sight of this limitation in his weak chapter on the New Left. He criticizes the New Left for its failure to develop a populist language which could reach white workers. As a participant, his criticism is heartfelt and poignant. He bitterly recalls that the few workers he worked with in the radical movement were equally interested in George Wallace. Yet he fails to realize that the New Left's attack on U.S. Imperialism, on Racism, on Sexism, moved it far beyond a populist rhetoric of a healthy body politic and therefore far beyond any ability to draw from the populist well.

This failure of political analysis, this Descent Into Discourse, often weakens his excellent study. For instance, he usually conflates Tom Watson and William Jennings Bryan as traditional Populists. But Watson was a leader of the Populist Party who worked for almost a decade to break the corrupt Democratic Party. Bryan was a leading Democrat, thrice the Party's Presidential candidate, who never called himself a Populist. True, they shared a similar rhetoric, yet during the 1890s they were in op-

position, not agreement. Most importantly, the Populist Party called for enlarging the powers of government to protect the People against centralized wealth, and for a clean new party to root out the corrupt Democrats and Republicans who blocked their course. This made them a natural ally of Black farmers who also looked to an honest government to defend their rights, an alliance which sporadically existed during the decade.

Kazin ignores such political programs when it suits his purpose but then magically pulls a political rabbit out of his rhetorical hat when he wants to shake up liberals and the Left. Having ignored the pro-state basis of the Populist Party, he carefully describes the anti-statism of well off 1980's white workers which makes them easy game for the New Right.

Yet, such criticisms should not detract from the value

of his book. He has established the taxonomy of (lower case "p") populism. He understands that populism may seem to be losing its value as the term is appropriated by merchandisers of fashionable pants and computer printers. But he maintains that populist language is too powerful a tool for progressives to let go of. His final message is that a revived Left will have to develop a language of mass appeal to those, "of all races who work for a living, knit neighborhoods together, and cherish what the nation is supposed to stand for," in order to transform the disenfranchised from observers to participants in determining their own fate.

Copyright (c) 1995 by H-NET, all rights reserved. This review may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact reviews@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-labor>

Citation: Seth M. Wigderson. Review of Kazin, Michael, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*. H-Labor, H-Net Reviews. June, 1995.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=76>

Copyright © 1995 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.