

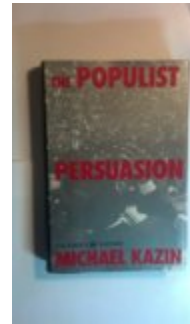
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peter Argersinger. *The Limits of Agrarian Radicalism: Western Populism and American Politics*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995. x + 302 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0702-0.

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 Robert D. Johnston (Department of History, Yale University)
Published on H-SHGAPE (June, 1995)



“When reform comes in this country, it starts with the masses. Reforms do not come from the brains of scholars.” –William Jennings Bryan, cited in Kazin, p. 106

We live in a particularly auspicious time to be writing about American populism. As the various political insurgencies—and the companion discussions of them on H-POL—indicate, we are going through another cycle of popular disgust with at least some of our leaders. And as usual, intellectuals—their connections with the masses always fairly tenuous—are having problems figuring out why and what it all means.

Michael Kazin and Peter Argersinger have written considerably different books, and each helps us with our task of keeping up with the people. Kazin’s is an elegant synthesis of nearly 200 years of populist and quasi-populist movements, ideas, and politicians. Argersinger’s is a much more tightly focused series of essays examining the political limitations imposed upon western populism in the 1890s. Both are excellent at what they do, although Kazin’s *The Populist Persuasion* is by far the more intellectually ambitious.

With a giant leap (although some significant smaller steps occurred along the way) Michael Kazin has become this academic generation’s foremost historical commentator on populism. He therefore has a considerable burden, for now Kazin’s statements in the press as well as the substantive content of his book will be open to contentious chatter from the rest of us. Kazin has put himself on the spot, then, in a way few historians do. How has he acquitted himself so far?

Overall, quite well. *The Populist Persuasion* generally persuades; it also informs and contributes to public debate in highly significant ways. The heart of the book is a narrative exploration of populist LANGUAGE, from Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson to Bill Clinton, Ross Perot, and Jesse Jackson (Newt Gingrich—to mention Oklahoma City—missed the publication deadline).

Kazin focuses on language because of his view that a consistent rhetoric of populism has structured much of American politics since at least the 1890s, if not before. Populist language has represented a “persuasion” able to “leap ideological boundaries” (p. 193) of liberalism and conservatism. Thus there is not one true Populism, with all else in its shadows, but rather a wide variety of Americans using the tropes of civil religion to claim that their politics represent ordinary folks.

Kazin uses his flexible definition to great effect, providing the first scholarly treatment that connects the People’s Party with George Wallace in a constructive manner (we should not have had to wait so long). Yet he goes much further than this, bringing in a wide cast of characters in essay-like chapters. In broadly chronological fashion, Kazin also analyzes:

- The revolutionary era (briefly) and nineteenth-century precursors to the grand agrarian insurgency
- The People’s Party and the late nineteenth century generally
- Labor and the Left during the early twentieth cen-

ture (readers of his previous *Barons of Labor* will not be surprised that Kazin's AFL is much less conventional than its common portrayal as a set of staid business unionists)

- The Prohibition movement, from the WCTU to the Anti-Saloon League

- Father Coughlin

- The CIO during the 1930s

- The anticommunist right wing during the 1940s and 1950s

- The white New Left, of which Kazin was an important participant

- Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and the GOP capture of populism during the 1970s and 1980s, and

- in an epilogue, recent populism, focusing on the 1992 elections.

Kazin is brave in his attempt to bring all this together. Some chapters sparkle with insight that comes out of his daring conceptualization of populism. In particular, thinking of prohibition—with its morality play of grasping elites sully the purity of the common people—as “populist” is quite wise. Also, Kazin's treatment of George Wallace is superb. Here the Alabama governor serves as a necessary bridge from 1930s liberal/ laborite visions of a multiethnic and multiracial common people to 1980s white working-class Reagan Democracy.

Kazin's flexibility and analytical bravery, however, seem to go a bit too far at times. Kazin states that populism is “more an impulse than an ideology” and that therefore we should be on the lookout for those who effectively “employed populism” rhetorically rather than fruitlessly trying to figure out who “real” populists were (p. 3). The search therefore produces some unusual suspects, ranging from (may Tom Watson rest peacefully in his grave) William Jennings Bryan, to Samuel Gompers, to Billy Sunday, to Philip Murray, to Richard Nixon, to Bill Clinton. And John Fitzgerald Kennedy dominates the dust jacket! I agree that it is useful to view such individuals as having, at critical times, spoken in a populist idiom. Kazin's approach, however, threatens to obscure the ways in which all these figures spoke within a broad liberal consensus that did not generally raise, in any fundamental manner, issues of who has held economic, cultural, and political power in America.

At the same time, Kazin's multidimensional approach

allows him to return (accurately, in my mind) Joe McCarthy to the populist pantheon. This is a brave move indeed, given the intolerance of most anti-Richard Hofstadter revisionists to thinking of any even indirect ideological and rhetorical links between the junior senator from Wisconsin and the original 1890s Golden Boys. While properly castigating the anti-democratic dismissal of the People's Party by Daniel Bell, Hofstadter, and their comrades, Kazin properly insists that both the Populists and McCarthy “appealed to the will and interests of a self-reliant, productive majority whose spiritual beliefs, patriotic ideals, and communities were judged to be under attack at the hands of a modernizing elite” (p. 192).

Kazin's most original ideas come through his explanation of the evolution of populist language. Since 1945, populism has moved from Left to Right—no surprises there. But how, if not “why”? Kazin deftly insists that MORAL concerns have been central to populism from its beginnings. Frances Willard and Ignatius Donnelly married economic and ethical issues; the main story of twentieth-century populism is their sundering. The strength of organized labor kept economic populism on the table through the New Deal, but after World War II the right wing has been able to latch onto orphaned moral concerns and build a majoritarian movement that detests the godless cultural elites who insist on condescending to and controlling the common people.

In some ways it is unfair to compare Peter Argersinger's *The Limits of Agrarian Radicalism* to Kazin's book, if only because Argersinger is much more focused. Along with an original introduction, his book brings together essays published over a quarter of a century that concentrate on 1890s Populists in Kansas, the Dakotas, and Washington, D.C. Yet the quality of Argersinger's scholarship in many ways matches that of Kazin. In particular, Argersinger is an indefatigable researcher who knows the politics of western populism probably better than anyone.

Argersinger is especially attentive to specific elections, ranging from the 1890 and 1891 balloting in Kansas to the 1897 Iowa poll to the 1902 election in South Dakota. Argersinger's purpose in examining such rituals is to demonstrate the powerful political forces opposing the Populists, above all in the form of anti-democratic election laws and legislative rules that favored the major parties—who were perfectly willing to legislate the Populists out of existence before the electorate had a chance to express a preference.

Argersinger's major achievement in the study

of Populism—and late nineteenth-century politics generally—is to focus our attention on such mundane matters as the form of ballots, statutes relating to third parties, and the right to be recognized in the halls of Congress. For in determining the basic rules, “Those who controlled the state thus gained the power to structure the system in their own behalf” (p. 136).

One of his most vivid examples involves the constant attempt by Republicans to interfere by law with fusion efforts between Democrats and Populists, often the only opportunity the latter had to have their voice heard. His studies also illustrate very convincingly that the American system of winner-take-all single-district elections is inherently undemocratic. Although Argersinger refrains from advocacy, his is clearly a voice in tune with the call of many Populists, Lani Guinier, and others for some form of proportional representation in the United States.

Argersinger also reminds us that the People’s Party was a PARTY. For example, he examines the process by which relatively unprincipled “practical” political leaders took over the organization and turned it away from broad-minded reform. Also, he warns us against thinking of Populist legislators as a monolith; in fact, much of the failure of the Populists in state capitals was caused by a powerful faction of relatively conservative Populist lawmakers who had more loyalty to economic development than to the “producing classes.”

Argersinger is at his best when he serves as a kind of muckraker, decrying the anti-democratic nature of the (too often celebrated) late nineteenth-century polity. He asks us to reflect on just how free the ballot was then—and by extension, now. In the end, though, it is important to question how critical were the forces that Argersinger emphasizes. Concerning the failure of the Populists, he writes that “structural limits were more important and influential than...cultural barriers: By helping establish the two-party system they underlay (and could further exploit) the cultural limits and imposed serious constraints of their own” (p. 8).

The problem is that Argersinger does not engage other historians’ thinking about Populism much at all, with the exception of an attack on Karel Bicha. To claim that election laws and legislative rules were this important, though, should have meant considering other causes of western Populism’s downfall, including a liberal and individualist economic culture, the regional limits of Populist strength, and the presence of effective competition within some states’ two-party structure (here the work of Jeffrey Ostler in *Prairie Populism* is es-

pecially important). Even as ardent an admirer of the Populists as Robert McMath states that they never really had any chance of success at all (see *American Populism: A Social History*). Argersinger’s failure to engage these larger questions unfortunately represents the limits of *The Limits of Agrarian Radicalism*.

If *The Limits of Agrarian Radicalism* and *The Populist Persuasion* are a good indication—and I think they are—studies of Populism have reached a new level of maturity. With maturity comes insight, wisdom, a sense of complexity, and caution. I wonder, though, whether Peter Argersinger and Michael Kazin display too much caution, too much balance, too much evenhandedness. For Populism was about, and populism is still about, righteous anger—directed against corrupt elites, against the oppression of ordinary Americans, against the promise of America betrayed.

Many—probably most—liberal, conservative, and multicultural/radical intellectuals would have us turn our back on such righteous anger. This is certainly what Thomas Bender advocates in what promises to be an influential review of Kazin’s book. Bender argues the populism is inherently parochial, Manichean, anti-intellectual, racist, sexist, and excessively moralistic. (*The Nation*, March 13, 1995, pp. 350-352). Better “democracy” than populism, according to the cosmopolitan intellectual historian.

Kazin, though, would appear to be somewhat paralyzed in responding to Bender’s argument because of his own rhetorical structure. Certainly Kazin issues a forceful defense of populism, despite its blemishes—which he discusses in copious detail. He reminds us that, in any case, the cursing of “the people” by intellectuals will not help produce a more progressive politics.

Yet *The Populist Persuasion* disdains to engage in political polemics or intervene in historiographical debates. Above all, Kazin has written a smooth narrative. Kazin’s approach has its benefits, certainly. His book is not only far and away the best treatment of the American populist tradition available, it is also one of the best surveys of twentieth-century American political history that we have—in fact, possibly THE best.

Kazin’s book lacks passion, though, in an age of increasingly passionate politics. *The Populist Persuasion* is not the work of an activist like Lawrence Goodwyn, alternately hopeful and despairing in *Democratic Promise*. Nor is this the work of a social critic like Christopher Lasch, who shares his subjects’ intensity and anguish in

The True and Only Heaven and *The Revolt of the Elites*.

Yet Kazin has written differently about populism in previous contexts. Indeed, one of his most important intellectual accomplishments has been to argue, in quite controversial essays, that labor historians have to give up on the category of “class” because American workers themselves have always embraced “populist,” as opposed to class, thinking. Such reasoning has opened up extremely productive areas of intellectual debate even while earning Kazin the reputation of a traitor among many Marxists.[1]

The Populist Persuasion eschews controversy, however, and few scholars will get truly upset reading it. Kazin’s book is gentle—a quality of grace in a mean-spirited intellectual age, to be sure, but possibly one that takes Kazin out of the game too much. Perhaps in writing for a general audience Kazin has unintentionally limited the appeal of his book. In contrast to the work of Richard Hofstadter, who could write beautifully AND propound an unforgettable argument, “the Kazin thesis” will in all likelihood be fuzzy a decade from now.

In the end, Michael Kazin’s excellent book raises a number of critical questions for us to think about. In the spirit of cyberspace openness and democracy, I will close my review by stating some of them in anticipation of a response from both Kazin and the general H-POL audience.

1) What proper role is there for the passionate (and gentle!) politicized historian in our discussions of populism? Hofstadter and Lasch are dead and Goodwyn has been marginalized. Perhaps intellectuals should consider giving up our much vaunted self-image as distinctively engaging in “critical discourse.” After all, the American public seems much more critical these days than many intellectuals.

2) Is populism an American political tradition comparable in influence, say, to the liberal and conservative traditions? Here Kazin’s reliance on language and his contention that populism is not an ideology seems partially suspect. How can a mere “impulse” and idiom have such power? And just what are the differences between an impulse, a persuasion, and an ideology anyway?

3) Is Kazin’s definition of populism the best available? He states that populism is “a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to

mobilize the former against the latter” (p. 1). Instead, a more essentialist definition might insist that populism is a set of political ideas and practices that emphasizes the radical democratization of political, economic, and cultural life in order to restore rule to “the people.”

4) Is it, therefore, completely arbitrary, to insist that it is proper to label some people “true populists” and others not? I recognize, though, that here I tread on dangerous ground.

5) How do we link up populist language and populist politics with American visions of class? Here Christopher Lasch’s insistence that populism is fundamentally a democratic movement of a LOWER MIDDLE CLASS antagonistic to both the professional/managerial class and the capitalist elite is much more promising in my mind than Kazin seems to indicate.[2]

6) What would a renewed “left populism” of the kind that Kazin advocates really look like? What class hostilities—and affinities—would it express? What racial policies might it adopt? Since ethical concerns are of the essence to effective populism, what kind of crusading morality would be at its heart? Would it operate primarily within the reigning two-party system, or would it seek other political expression? When might it occur? [3]

7) Finally, are WE the enemy? What role are there for scholars who consider themselves populists? How connected can intellectuals ever be to the common folk?

Perhaps, in the end, we can only be “firmly equivocal,” Michael Kazin’s nice phrase about his attitude toward populism. Let us equivocate, however, with many different voices.

Notes

[1]. Kazin, “A People Not a Class: Rethinking the Political Language of the Modern US Labor Movement,” in Mike Davis and Michael Sprinker, eds., *Reshaping the U.S Left: Popular Struggles in the 1980s* (Verso, 1988), 257-286; Kazin, “Struggling with Class Struggle: Marxism and the Search for a Synthesis of U.S. Labor History,” *Labor History* 28 (Fall 1987): 497-514; and particularly in response Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent Into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Temple, 1990), pp. 122-124 and p. 252, where we learn that Kazin is “intent upon establishing himself as the Arthur Koestler of the New Left labor historians.”

[2]. For Kazin on Lasch, see Kazin, Barbara Ehrenreich, and Lasch, “Current Debate: The Politics of Pop-

ulism," *Tikkun* 6 (Sept.-Oct. 1991): 37-44.

[3]. For some of Kazin's current political views, see Maurice Isserman and Kazin, "As Bill Goes, So Do We; The Left and Clinton," *The Nation*, May 30, 1994.

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H-NET BOOK REVIEW RESPONSE Published by H-Pol@msu.edu (June 1995)

Response to Johnston for H-Pol by Michael Kazin, American University <MKazin@american.edu>.

Robert Johnston has written an extraordinarily generous review, for which I thank him. It's also a perceptive one, cognizant of what I didn't do and of the costs of that neglect. Johnston wants us to pay attention to the big issues, both historiographically and politically, that swirl around the study of U.S. populism—and his questions are both essential and difficult to answer. But I'll take a stab.

First, a confession. I did write the book more out of a desire to change the sensibility with which historians (the overwhelming majority of whom lean left—as do I) regard social movements and political language than because I wanted to make an Argument about populism in the U.S. I have long thought that we secular liberals and radicals failed to take seriously the religious well-springs of much political talk—and that the abiding and sometimes dominant conservatism of Americans (particularly white ones) was going largely unstudied. The left demands that the past do its duty, some British historian once wrote. And, in the 70s and 80s, it wasn't acquitting itself too well—or so a lot of American historians seemed to think.

Anyway, I wrote the book to underscore the flexibilities, often ironic ones, of what is probably our major language of discontent—and certainly our major language of class. And, as Johnston knows, I also wanted to discuss how the organized right learned to talk in populist ways—an alarming development from which we of the liberal to radical bent have still not accustomed ourselves (thus we continue to call it all a smokescreen for big business—which may be effective as propaganda—but doesn't explain why and how it happened).

So I wasn't really trying to substitute a Kazin thesis for a Hofstadter or Goodwyn thesis (and it's flattering even to be compared unfavorably to the former). I don't

think one bite size argument can make sense of 200-odd years of a political discourse. All I can claim is that I tried to identify that discourse and to describe and incompletely explain how politically active Americans created and made use of it.

Turning to Johnston's fascinating questions: 1) I'm all for passionate history (in fact David Oshinsky in the NY Times did call me "passionately liberal"—so there!). I recommend Michael Lind's new book (previewed in this month's Harper's), if you want to see a brilliant, historically informed mind who's trying to resuscitate class politics of the left populist variety. But it can also be useful to tell the stories of left and right clearly and fairly—as long as the reader knows your principles and vision, knows how you would have liked the story to come out. That's what Hofstadter did, I think, and what Alan Brinkley does now. Goodwyn, I believe, hurt his cause by constructing barricades of his own device and firing away at opponents and bystanders alike. Lasch is a different matter—he was perhaps the most brilliant historical mind of his generation (at least on this side of the Atlantic) writing in English. As such, he was right (that is, he had a good deal to teach) even when he was wrong—as I think he was in his penultimate book when he tried to substitute the white lower-middle class for the bygone proletariat.

2) Yes, I didn't say enough about populism as a tradition. When it comes to big ideas, I like to make little suggestions and then move on to the story. All I can say here is that populism has been a way white Americans (and a few of other races) voiced their suspicion of the national ideals betrayed, and reclaimed democracy—as vision and as process—from the powerful. It's so powerful an idiom because (here I'm going to sound like Gordon Wood) because the ideals are so powerful, even revolutionary. I am continually astounded by the way Americanism, in its populist meanings, whips up disgruntled unionists, Militiateers, etc. The value of the French Revolution has always been contested in that nation—and recently went through another round of disillusionment and defense. And socialist revolution has, of course, fallen from grace nearly everywhere. But that Declaration of Independence goes on and on.

3) on the problem of definition: of course, you could define populism as radical democratization. But then where's the place of anti-elite resentment? In his review, Tom Bender saw radical democracy as an alternative to populism. I think he's right—populism should connote an angry, betrayed form of democratic discourse—and I

think should contain some notion of a producer ethic (so central to the People's Party).

4) So, yes, I don't think it's helpful to argue about "true" populists and "phony" ones. The term has long ago left its cradle of creation in order to swim in the turbulent waters of post-modern politics and wrap-around media. It's too late to claim it for the good guys and gals now—remember David Duke was the first one since the 1890s to start a Populist Party!

5) Here, on the matter of class, Johnston is fingering the crux of the issue. Yes, populist talkers gesture at a middling sector as the typical, ordinary, average Americans. But, though he may be successful at identifying that as a class onto itself in Prog-era Portland, I don't know what the lower-middle class means in contemporary America—salaried people with little chance to rise to management? Folks who own houses, but in working-class suburbs? And where does race and recent immigrant status come in (and it always does)? Lasch wanted to elide racial conflict from his vision—but that's not the country I know. Lind is making a mighty effort to substitute class for race (in affirmative action, for example) as the only way to get "the people" to stop fighting amongst themselves in the so-called cultural war and to focus on the professional rich and the gaping chasm in wealth and resources that's opened up over the past two decades. I want to cheer him on (he's a lot less cranky than Lasch, and much less despairing). But the largely segregated culture we live in will make it very hard to move from manifesto to movement.

I'll skip the rest of 6) for another time.

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7) No, intellectuals are not the enemy—did Johnston mean that seriously? Every social movement that has ever existed has included intellectuals—call them “organic” ones, if you'd like. In fact, the right is less afraid of its thinkers than we are of ours—even though the left, as we know it, is strongest on and around campuses. After all, where would the modern right be without James Burnham, Whittaker Chambers, William F. Buckley, Jr., and Kevin Phillips? And, not to be forgotten, Newt is a former historian who likes teaching class and giving out reading lists.

I don't think Americans are opposed to ideas; most just don't like people who talk about ideas condescendingly. One way to put it is that intellectuals are all right one by one; it's intellectuals as a class who are under suspicion. Hofstadter's weakest book is the self-defensive one about anti-intellectualism.

So populism can be and probably must be a potent means to the end of a more democratic polity—and more resources and power for wage-earners and potential wage-earners of all races. But it can't be the end itself and shouldn't become an anchor for those understandably fed up with tired-out Marxists and dead-ended advocates of identity politics.

Carry it on—

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