

# THE OLD TRADITION OF POPULISM

Michael Kazin



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■ *Are relations between the masses and the elites in America really full of conflict? Is it true that the masses reject everything related to the elites?*

In the United States there is a special tradition of both anti-elite moods and a populism that is related to them. There are different kinds of populism, if you will, which can very broadly be described as left and right. Left populism and left populists, for instance, tend to be very suspicious of the corporate elite and, of course, they can be very suspicious of the political elite, especially if the political elite is in favor of stronger power and a stronger government, the way Obama and his fellow democrats are perceived as being.

■ *Taking the example of such an anti-elite and populist movement as the Tea Party movement, with whom does this movement's message resonate more – the poor masses or the middle class? Who dislikes the elites more and why?*

The Tea Party movement, again, like any movement, has to be understood in the historical context. In many ways, the Tea Party movement is a continuation of pursuing movements, which have been saying much the same thing about the government's turn to socialism, and about elites since the 1930s, ever since the 'New Deal' of Roosevelt. **So, the message is not really new. What's new is a heightened level of urgency that you see in the Tea Party movement.** 'If you don't act now, if you don't stop the goofy government now, the American promise, the American dream, the conception of American will be over and America will be doomed.' That kind of apocalyptic language and thinking is certainly not completely new, but it is one of the things that has given rise to a pretty powerful movement on the right. Every such movement since the 1930s has been much more associated with the Republican party than the Democratic party, and most opinion polls and studies have shown that they were Republicans before. They were overwhelmingly white and overwhelmingly older, over 45 or 50, and they overwhelmingly are Christian – and not just Christian, but even Jehovah Christian. I mean, these people are the base of the persuasive movement that is less than 80 years old. We are surprised in this country and overseas maybe to see this movement, because there is a sense that somehow Obama has grown into a new political hero.

■ *Considering the reverse process, what are the attitudes of the elites towards the masses? Do the elites dislike the masses as well, or are they rather indifferent?*

**In the United States you really cannot talk about an elite in one way divorced from the masses.** We have something of a meritocracy, and some people in the elite came from more humble backgrounds. But then you have people, the richest people in America, like Bill Gates, Ross Perot, Warren Buffett and others, who did

not inherit their wealth. They found entrepreneurial ways to accumulate a lot of wealth and to use that wealth to have a certain amount of political power.

There is inherited wealth in America, and there is racial difference between people – those who are wealthy in the elite are mostly white, and more and more of the American population is not white. **Quite often, antagonism between elites and masses in the US has a cultural and historical context.** Sarah Palin is not quite rich by American standards but she is quite popular among people because she seems to have cultural taste and common leisure activities. There are a lot of markers of cultural populism, which she embodies, and that's one of the things enabling her to say, 'I am part of the people, and these liberal democrats are not!'

■ *How transnational are the modern American elites? How much do they rely on the elites of other countries and how much on their own people?*

Certainly there are people in the corporate elite in the United States, especially in the financial industry, who would be just as happy living in Paris, or in Tokyo, or in Shanghai than they would in New York or Boston, or Chicago. And yet, at the same time, most of these people have grown up in one country, they feel American and they also speak the same language. As you know, Americans are for the most part very mono-linguistic, and this is largely for historical reasons. Now, cultural elites and academics, for example, people like me, perhaps sometimes speak foreign languages. There is a sort of community of intellectual elites – historians, political scientists, literature professors, who have much in common with others in their particular sector of the elite, and overseas, in other countries, as they do with other Americans. ■

*Yulia Netesova exclusively for  
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