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Andrew Richter

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American Populism During the Ninteenth-Century

By Andrew Richter

In his book, *The Populist Persuasion*, Michael Kazin contends that the first populist movement in U.S. history was the Populist Party during the 1890s. Kazin describes the Age of Jackson as a mere foundation to the Populist Party, which he believed was a full realization of populism in American politics. Kazin’s argument is inaccurate because Jackson did, in fact, employ populism as the basis of his political platform. There is no substantial difference between Jackson’s populism and the later Populist Party. Indeed, their separate ideologies led them to identify similar enemies and employ similar tactics. Essentially, populism does not subscribe to specific ideologies, but rather uses a set of methods to engage the audience of the American people. Jacksonian politics were inherently populist because they correspond to Kazin’s definition of populism.

Kazin asserts that populism itself is defined by a particular pattern of language. While this language does not necessarily follow a specific, rigidly defined ideology, it does contain several constant traits. Kazin contends that populist politics are based on a perceived dualistic conflict between a virtuous, powerless, and oppressed “people” versus the corrupt, malevolent, and seemingly all-powerful “elite.” Only the moral “people” could defeat the immoral “elite.” In Kazin’s model, despite calling for radical modifications to the government, populism never challenges its legitimacy. It merely declares that the nation has gone awry due to a specific group of people or policies and must be steered back on track. Finally, populist groups bolster their arguments by invoking the values of the Founders, particularly self-governance and the protection of individual rights. Both the politics of Jackson and the Populist Party match this description. In fact, Kazin himself notes that from the language used by the Populist Party, “the continuity from the Age of Jackson is obvious.” Yet, he curiously refuses to classify Jacksonian politics as populist.

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2 Ibid., 32.
A shared methodology in the use of language does not denote a shared procedure to solve a specific problem. Indeed, Jackson and the Populist Party differed in their approach to reforming bank practices in the United States. Jackson believed that the only way to protect the people from the abuses of banking was to keep the role of the government restricted since the Second Bank of the United States was chartered by the U.S. government. He thought that this strategy would prevent systematic oppression since the threat would have to be decentralized. However, the Populist Party endorsed the exact opposite tactic. The Populists saw the government as the necessary tool to fill the power vacuum and mediate between the conflicting interests of banking and the common people. Despite the disparity between the policies, the end goal was nonetheless the same: to protect the interest of the people from powerful forces that they could not contend with.

Jackson himself used the type of language that Kazin emphasized as typically populist. For example, in his veto of re-chartering the Second Bank of the United States, Jackson described a dualistic clash of classes. The elite, with the power of the Bank behind them, would make “the rich richer and the potent more powerful” and would therefore work against the “humble members of society […] who have neither the time nor the means of securing like favors.” In addition, the management of the Bank would only be comprised of the rich, who also could remain in power indefinitely without accountability to either the people or the government. Jackson declared that this “exclusive privilege” of “monopoly” would eventually threaten all of the institutions of the United States. Jackson directly referenced or cited the Constitution, harkening back to the Founders’ own doctrine as a means to legitimate his actions against the bank. His primary claim was that he was upholding the “principles of the Constitution by issuing the veto.” Jackson also invoked the phrase “necessary and proper” from the Constitution in an effort to legitimate his veto by portraying it as constitutional, and thus, within the boundaries of

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4 Ibid., 29.
normal governance. In the last paragraph of the veto, Jackson criticized the misuse of government, but not the institution itself, which is another pattern of populism.\(^6\)

Jackson continued to follow the populist pattern in his Farewell Address at the end of his presidency. In particular, he focused on the conspiracy of the wealthy elite and the toll it inflicted on the common people. A similar sentiment would later be shared by the Populist Party. Jackson condemned the pursuit of wealth by the “moneyed power” at the expense of the people. He specifically pointed to the taxes which raised prices on everyday items because of the effect on the vast majority of people. He additionally singled out “the agricultural and laboring classes” as those who bore the brunt of this injustice. This very same perspective would later be espoused by the Populists as well. They would also point to the economic downturn of entire groups of ordinary people. Jackson lamented that the rich were able to use the government to oppress the people financially through taxes. He even went so far as to assert that politicians had aligned with the rich for their own gain. However, Jackson likened this scenario to his war on the Second Bank of the United States—the same target of the aforementioned veto. The people had defeated such enemies before and could do so again. Just as he did in his veto of the Second Bank, Jackson called this “an abuse of the power of taxation,” which is critical as this indicates that taxation was not inherently evil, only its misuse was. This was yet another defense of the government’s legitimacy. The evidence from both of these documents strongly indicates that Jackson and his politics matches the definition of populism laid out by Kazin.\(^7\)

The Populist Party of the 1890s exhibited the same characteristics as Jackson, and therefore fit Kazin’s definition of populism. For example, just as Jackson did, the Populists identified the people as victims of a much more powerful foe. Indeed, the Omaha Platform—the outline of the party’s political platform issued in 1892—affirmed that they sought to “restore the government of the Republic to the hand of the ‘plain people.’” The elite who usurped power, in their eyes, fit the same type as

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\(^6\) Jackson, “Andrew Jackson’s Veto Message Against Re-chartering the Bank of the United States.”

Jackson’s rhetoric. The Populists argued that the rich used politicians to gain control over ordinary Americans’ lives, which essentially formed a conspiracy regarding financial institutions. Companies, homes, jobs, and land were all subsequently stolen through mortgage defaults, foreclosures, and purposefully weakened currency. The loss of jobs and income felt like theft because of the impact on people’s livelihoods, especially since it only served to enrich the already wealthy. The Populists maintained that all of these underhanded tactics were intended to sap the wealth from honest working men. Just as Jackson had before them, the Populists highlighted farmers and urban laborers as the primary victims. The Populists asserted that corruption had perverted the American government and that no branch was serving the people any longer. They labeled the situation a “moral, political, and material ruin,” all of which are telltale signs of populist thought. Additionally, throughout the Omaha Platform, the Populists used the language of the Constitution and the Founding, also distinctive of populist thought. The most symbolic reference was the day the convention met to write the platform, on July 4, 1892. The most visible example was their claim to be completely aligned with the goals of the Constitution, and the Populists even quoted most of the Preamble verbatim as part of the Omaha Platform.8

Mary Lease, a prominent Populist speaker, echoed many aspects of the populist pattern as well. Although her speeches focused primarily on women’s roles within Populism, the image of women that Lease utilized was closely connected to the experience of common Americans. Farmers and laborers were frequently referred to by name and their struggles were encapsulated in the phrase “legalized robbery and corporate wrong.” The ordinary people who were “loyal and patriotic” were under attack. The loss of homes, due to mortgage defaults, was the main plight that Lease mentioned. She claimed that the rich, represented by Wall Street, were in league with the government to increase their wealth. Lease further lamented how the ordinary people who built America, and had transformed the West from a desert into a land brimming with opportunity, were quickly becoming victims of what she saw as a Wall Street conspiracy. This language enabled Lease to utilize

another populist strategy that Jackson had employed to great effect: if the people were capable of creating the country, they could also fix it.\(^9\)

The Populists sought to further legitimize their position by invoking the values of the nation’s Founding as a justification for the party’s political agenda. Indeed, Lease claimed that ordinary people were “the authors of the nation’s liberties.” These liberties, which were supposed to be immutable, were being stripped from the average citizen and had to be decisively reaffirmed. Lease declared that only the people could do this, as they had during the Revolution and throughout history. She referred to Charlotte Corday and John Brown, two common folk who died for righteous causes and shifted the history of entire countries. Additionally, Lease pointed to Populist victories in Kansas, where their campaigns had ousted the detached and self-interested Senator John J. Ingalls. She attributed this to women alone, implying that totally united, the common people could accomplish anything and overcome any foe.\(^10\) Jackson used the same rhetoric in his description of the people’s victory over the Bank.

In light of these cases, it is clear that Jackson and the Populists both used the same methods in their political discourse. Populism is defined by the language used and not by the goals of the individuals utilizing it. Jackson and the Populists both identified “the people” as virtuous victims, especially those within the agricultural and laboring classes. Simultaneously, they denounced the “elite” who oppressed them and enjoyed a corrupt monopoly on state power that could only be broken by the unity of the common folk. In both the Jacksonian and Populist narratives, the political corruption of the elite was even more egregious because it violated the principles of the American Revolution as well as the American people’s continuous efforts and sacrifices since. Since Jackson employed this model, as did the Populist Party, Jackson should logically be labeled as a populist too. The differences between Jackson and the Populists were purely tactical in nature, their primary objectives remained the same—to ‘restore’ power to the average man and woman, and to break the influence


\(^10\) Ibid.
of the entrenched power elite. Therefore, Jacksonian politics were undoubtedly and irrefutably populist in nature.

Bibliography


Author Bio

Andrew Richter is a CSUSB student who is working on his Bachelor of Arts in History, with a concentration in United States history. He is looking forward to graduating at the end of the Spring 2018 quarter. Afterwards, his goal is to obtain a Single Subject Credential in order to teach U.S. History at the high school level, an aspiration he has held from the age of 10. Andrew’s favorite extracurricular activity is working with the youth group at his church, which has been a highly enriching experience. He would like to thank Dr. Ryan Keating, Dr. Jeremy Murray, and Dr. Kate Liszka for the memorable opportunities of study that they have offered. In addition, Dr. Stephanie Muravchik deserves special mention as the impetus for this piece through her class on the history of populism in the United States. Andrew would finally like to thank Quewyn Wild, a good friend who has extended both solicited and unsolicited guidance over the course of many years.