WHAT DO WE MEAN BY POPULISM?

The “Second” Klan as a Case Study

The presidential campaign and election of Donald Trump made “populism” a political buzzword. As its usage spread, it became steadily more pejorative and imprecise. True, many commentaries distinguished between “right wing” and “left wing” populism, notably in contrasting Trump’s and Bernie Sanders’s campaigns. But without greater specificity, these labels are misleading and damaging to political literacy, by suggesting that any popular, grassroots cause is populist. Historians in particular should insist on greater concreteness in labeling political movements.

For historians, the American Populist or People’s Party of the 1890s has long served as the model of left-wing populism, while interwar European fascist movements represent right-wing populism. To identify the common denominators in the left and right versions, it’s best to think of populism as a “cluster concept,” to identify commonalities among movements that share some but not necessarily all attributes. Populisms often display 13 such attributes: large size, mass mobilization, claiming to speak for “the people,” defining “the people” as victims, venerating agrarian communities or small towns, seeking to reclaim a national “destiny,” demagoguery, anger, propensity for conspiracy theories, distrust of “experts” and established politicians, extreme nationalism, isolationism, and authoritarian leadership.

Only the first five fit the Populist Party. Furthermore, it is not clear that modern left-to-liberal movements fit the populist model: few display any of the last 11 features. In the Sanders campaign, the only populist elements were the mass enthusiasm of his supporters and their sense of victimization by neoliberal economic policies. Woman suffrage, the Bonus Army of 1932, the Civil Rights Movement, anti–Vietnam War protests, and environmentalism were large, participatory mobilizations, but they were not populist.
American history, however, offers a specimen of right-wing populism that includes virtually all the above characteristics: the multi-million-member northern Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s. It argued that America was intended as and should remain a nation of white Protestants—“Nordics” in Klanspeak. This national destiny was being subverted by immigrants, namely Catholics and Jews. It is possible that a majority of native-born Americans shared and legitimated this attitude, so this second Klan did not need to be secret or violent; it operated by promoting ideas and electing its members to office. It even claimed to be defending democracy, though of a particular type: majoritarian or “plebiscitary” democracy, in which a majority could override minority interests. Its electoral strategy put into office 16 senators, scores of congressmen (the Klan claimed 75), 11 governors, and thousands of state, county, and municipal officials. Several state governments, notably Indiana and Oregon, were dominated by the Klan for four to five years. Dorothy Thompson, whose coverage of Nazism was influenced by observing the 1920s KKK, pointed out that a dictator “never stands for election on the platform of dictatorship.”

Klan populism was also religious: America’s destiny was sacred. If Jesus were to come, one Klan publicist declared, he would be a Klansman. Still, its prejudice was fungible: in the 1930s, for example, many Klanspeople came to support the right-wing, anti-Semitic, Catholic radio personality Father Coughlin. In other words, this right-wing populism was characterized less by specific prejudices and more by a generic resentment of disadvantaged groups—resentment always directed downward, never upward.

Both the Populist Party and the Klan saw America as unique among nations, an exemplar of freedom and democracy. Both also claimed to speak for “the people.” In the Klan’s version of American exceptionalism, non-WASP immigrants could never be patriotic Americans—Catholics because they owed unconditional allegiance to the Pope, Jews because they operated within an international cabal of financiers. (In one Klan minister’s remarkable version of a classic biblical story, the reason Jonah emerged unscathed from the whale was that Jews are “indigestible,” too “hard” even for the “powerful digestive machinery in the stomach of the monster.”) Klan lingo expressed this bluntly, calling nonmembers “aliens” and Klan
initiations “naturalizations.” The Klan was rhetorically exiling non-WASPs from citizenship.

In another similarity, the Populist Party and the Klan both claimed that their country was being stolen from its rightful citizenry. But while the Populist Party identified big corporations, trusts, and railroads as the thieves, the Klan made no criticisms of Wall Street or big business. Instead it offered a “class analysis” common among right-wing populists, defining intellectuals, liberals, professionals, and especially secularists who espoused evolutionary theory as elites who sought to undermine the “true” America.

That definition of elites expressed the Klan’s hostility to big city cosmopolitanism and alleged sinfulness. Urban life was a chaotic “babel,” and urbanites’ licentious behavior and defiance of Prohibition were part of their drive to destroy America. “Real America” resided in smaller towns and cities, assumed to be homogeneous; the Klan displayed intense anxiety about diversity, a defining feature of cities. That anxiety also underlay its isolationism, which was driven less by fear of foreign entanglements and more by suspicion of foreign cultures. That suspicion was expressed also in an ideological test for patriotism: dissenters from Klan ideology were assumed to be the progeny of foreign plots.
In the narrative of theft, populism typically positioned its supporters as victims, an outlook that characterizes many social movements, left and right. But that was a tricky maneuver for the Klan, for it classified all WASPs as victims, even those who wielded great economic and political power. So the Klan bolstered its claims of victimization with allegations of secret conspiracies. It saw conspiracies everywhere, and immigration was itself one. Catholics and Jews immigrated not to find a better life or to escape from poverty and persecution, but because their overlords had sent them to sabotage the nation. Immigration was an intentional threat. Jews controlled Hollywood in order to subvert women’s morality, through their suggestive plots and scantily clad women. Catholic immigrants were the Pope’s vassals, sent with orders to infiltrate and contaminate police forces, politicians, and schools. These false religions, including the Russian and Greek Orthodoxies, defied Prohibition in order to weaken the American fiber. The Klan orchestrated a chorus of what we today call fake news: the Pope had already landed, incognito, in Washington, where he was building a headquarters for the takeover of the United States; 90 percent of US police forces were run by Catholics in the service of this takeover.

Populism has often been characterized by demagoguery. Demagoguery operates by fomenting fear, in what Richard Hofstadter considered “paranoid” movements, and the Klan’s meteoric rise rested on creating fear of clandestine intrigues. Fear-mongering produced a doubled effect, fostering a defensive cohesion among insiders and a scapegoating of outsiders. When those fears subsided—in part because the Klan’s program became national policy with the anti-immigration laws of 1923 and 1924—the Klan rapidly receded. It thrived on fear and could not flourish without it.

Klanspeople presented themselves as warriors summoned to rescue the nation. But in the North their major weapon was intimidation, not violence. Although Klan hate speech stimulated some vigilantism, its leaders emphasized electoral campaigns and public displays of power through pageants, parades, and cross burnings. The latter were deployed less as direct threats, in the manner of the first Klan, than as symbols of its power.  

During the 1924 Democratic National Convention in Madison Square Garden, when the Klan successfully blocked the nomination of Catholic Al
Smith, it set up colossal burning crosses across the Hudson in New Jersey so as to be visible from New York. The Klan’s regular exaggerations of the size of its membership and attendance at its rallies also served to intimidate potential opponents.

The 1920s Klan illustrates some of the general attributes of populisms but also their individual distinctiveness. Even far-right populisms, such as fascism, come in varieties; as historian Robert Paxton wrote, we cannot identify fascism “by its plumage.” Distinguishing between “right” and “left” populisms cannot substitute for specifying the methods and ideas of these movements. Using “populist” generically, and lazily, to characterize all social movements with broad grassroots support is uninformative at best, and often misleading and biased. Historians have a particular responsibility to insist on particularizing what we are talking about when we say “populist.”


NOTES


3. The second Klan did, however, ring the Catholic University of Dayton with burning crosses.
