

Populism and the Left

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During the 1970s, a series of impassioned calls for a “new populism” appeared on the American left, testifying to the durability of the populist legacy. Progressive politicians such as Barbara Mikulski, Fred Harris, Jim Hightower, and Dennis Kucinich have all been labeled “populist” or have used the term in self-description. But conservative politicians have similarly been called “populist,” especially those with ties to the New Right like Jack Kemp and, preeminently, Ronald Reagan.

It is not surprising that present-day populist expressions seem ambiguous. After all, populism’s defining project—the call for return of power to an historically and geographically constituted people¹—is subject to very different interpretations. Whom “the people” includes, whether the conception of the people’s destiny is open and evolving or static and unchanging, what structures are responsible for “usurping” power from the people and must be transformed in order to achieve popular rule—all such questions can be answered in dramatically different ways. Moreover, the success of New Right and Republican politicians in appropriating populist themes as part of their rhetorical crusade against the “Eastern establishment” and those “who would sell out the country” is disturbing confirmation of the potency of such appeals in the present context, even when used by wealthy and powerful interests themselves.

These developments make it politically urgent that there be a further inquiry into the dynamics of populism. Why are populist themes surfacing now, across a range of political viewpoints? What explains their appeal? And what factors will shape their final resolution in a democratic or an authoritarian direction?

¹ Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Democratic Promise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); *The Populist Moment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (London: New Left Books, 1977): “‘Populism’ is not just an analytical category but a datum of experience. It is that ‘something in common’ which is perceived as a component of movements whose social bases are totally divergent” (p. 146); and also: “Popular traditions . . . far from being arbitrary . . . are the residue of a unique and irreducible historical experience and, as such, constitute a more solid and durable structure of meanings than the social structure itself. . .” (p. 167). In these passages, Laclau gets at populism’s basic meaning—the call for return of power to an historically and geographically constituted (and thus specific and unique) people.

One way of focusing on such questions is to begin by addressing the question, Who changes society? There are two different answers to the question that I want to examine and compare. One is the concept of "the working class," which is familiar from socialist history and theory. The other is the notion of "the people," drawn from populist tradition.² I want to argue that a synthesis of insights from both of these conceptions is needed in order to form a democratic politics adequate to the present. Class is a category more useful for the analysis and criticism of capitalist institutions—for explaining and describing how people are organized and shaped by modern industrial society—than as an instrument of political change and self-consciousness. There is a crucial disjunction between the Marxist notions of a class "in itself"—people as organized by modern society—and a class "for itself"—the self-conscious agent of social transformation. This is captured in the folk saying that the left knows what is wrong but doesn't know what to do about it. In contrast, while the idea of the people, or peoplehood, lacks analytical specificity, and cannot be substituted for the term *class* as a tool for describing or analyzing modern society, it also includes a range of intuitions that Marxist-inspired political theory typically lacks. At present, moreover, the populist sensibility reflects a gathering force of great potential power: a people's reassertion of the need for "roots," and its aggressive defense of those roots against the ravages of the corporate state.

The concept of class emerged in its modern sense in the period 1770–1840, when critics began to use it to designate fixed names for particular groups—the lower class, the middle class, the upper class, and so forth. In particular, it described economic relationships born of the modern age. One cotton spinner in 1818 referred to employers and workers as "two distinct classes of persons." John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx both used an initial class typology of landlords, capitalists, and laborers. For Marx, this division was increasingly superseded by the simple categories of bourgeoisie and proletariat.

Here class is used in a double sense. First, it is a category of description, a way of analyzing what actually happens to people in modern society. This is the "class in itself" of Marxist terminology. However, class is also used to describe a formation, a group as organized, as self-conscious, and in conflict with other classes. This is what Marx meant by "class for itself."

² The "left" is understood in the following pages generally as the socialist and social democratic traditions stemming from the great nineteenth-century theoreticians, preeminently Marx and Engels. In the specific American case, I have found Michael Harrington's argument in *Socialism* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972) convincing: that the broad American progressive movement since the New Deal, anchored in labor unions but including a range of other reform constituencies, has had much the same welfare-state vision as European social democracy, without the formal language of the left. Thus by "left in America" I mean in general the New Deal Coalition and its progeny, like the "new left."

In this double meaning can be found great irony. As a category of description, the left view details and names profound experiences and processes of modern life: the development of modern communications technologies, the bending and reshaping of the "spaces" in which people live and work day to day, the uprooting and destruction of settled and traditional connections. In this conception of political agency, the working class had first to be homogenized by these painful but necessary processes of "progressive readjustment." In attempting to replace the social qualities that these processes strip from the workers, socialist theorists have proposed an abstract model of association to replace what has been lost—an abstraction that reproduces the language and terms of the capitalist marketplace itself. Such irony is apparent in the work of Marx and Friedrich Engels and their theoretical and political progeny.

In the first instance, it was the brilliant project of Karl Marx to give historical specificity to the age-old conflict between social groups, and to illuminate the objective circumstances that hinder or facilitate group formation. For example, in the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels described the process of the working class's aggregation into factories, the increasing polarization of classes, the routinization of the work process—all factors that worked to increase collective solidarity. In a remarkable section of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, by way of contrast, Marx analyzed the circumstances, such as bad communications, that encouraged isolation and prevented the French peasantry from forming common bonds. In their treatment of cities, Marx and Engels suggested that workers' new freedom of movement and contacts with a diversity of subcultures would create preconditions for "universal" consciousness. Thus for Engels, the "driving of the workers from hearth and home" that accompanied urbanization and industrialization was "the very first condition of their intellectual emancipation." In his view, "modern large-scale industry . . . has turned the worker, formerly chained to the land, into a completely propertyless proletarian, liberated from all traditional fetters, a free outlaw."³

Though Marx and Engels saw such developments as laying the basis for broader forms of association and for working-class self-assertion, they also described with great feeling the pain and hardship involved in such processes. According to Marx, in the modern factory "men are effaced by their labor." Labor becomes abstract, valued according to money alone. "The pendulum of the clock has become as accurate a measure of the relative activity of two workers as it is of the speed of two locomotives." Under modern factory conditions, peoples' particular identities, their histories, are, as Marx said, "obliterated."

³ "Communist Manifesto," in Lewis Feuer, ed., *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969), pp. 1-41; Karl Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), pp. 123-24; Friedrich Engels, *The Housing Question* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), p. 29.

The machines, the rhythm of work, acquire an eerie reality of their own and “appear as a world for themselves, quite independent of and divorced from the individuals.” In contrast, “standing over against these productive forces we have the majority, robbed of all real life-content, abstract individuals.”⁴

The insights embedded in phrases like these—“abstract individuals,” “robbed of all real life-content”—have been developed by the left into a powerful and appealing analysis. They constitute a naming of people’s experiences, a language for describing the anomie, the homelessness, the felt injustice and abuse of the modern world. Out of such understanding comes the left’s impassioned support for the forms of association that people create from shared suffering: benevolent associations, trade unions, cooperatives, and finally electoral parties, all built on people’s experiences as “workers.”

The problem for the left has been not with its analysis of the forces making for the dehumanization of the worker, but with the attempt to develop a conception of action based upon the worker as a product of capitalism. In its dominant theoretical tradition (and here, one should certainly exempt a few theorists, like William Morris), the left draws its theory of group formation as well as its image of the future from the same processes, and from the vast, collectivized settings where people are organized by capitalism. Thus it assumes that a sundering of people from their historic and organic connections—from their “roots”—is the indispensable preliminary to freedom. It proposes, in place of community weakened or lost, an organization based on abstract solidarity. “Proletarianization” is not only analyzed and protested, but also incorporated. In sum, the left does more than name and describe modern suffering, it also proposes a theory for ending it that assumes that people are and must be that to which capitalism tends to reduce them. It is a theory that is therefore profoundly flawed.

In Marx’s view, the workers’ deracination was the *basis* of their revolt. As he argued in the introduction to his *Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’*, the workers’ “complete loss of humanity” forces them to “a complete redemption of humanity.” Or, as he put it in the *Holy Family*, “Since the abstraction of all humanity, even of the semblance of humanity, is practically complete in the full-blown proletariat, it follows that the proletariat can and must free itself.” Both Marx and Engels frequently described the workers’ relation to the past with great ferocity. For Marx, there had to be a “radical rupture” with what had gone before. For Engels, “tradition is the great retarding force. . . but being merely passive is sure to be broken down.” In the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx argued that a revolution by the working class would necessitate a kind of radical am-

⁴ Marx is here quoted by Lucio Colletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin: Studies in Ideology and Society* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), pp. 86–88.

nesia: "the social revolution cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future."⁵

Marx's indifference to working-class traditions did not spring from an indifference to working-class sufferings. There is a strong feeling for the concrete in the historical writings of Marx and Engels; they show a keen instinct for the actual unfolding of social movements that often confounds the abstract universalism of their political theory.

Yet the point is that the basic theory that saw revolutionary consciousness as an abstract universalism, a rootless cosmopolitanism, and that saw anticapitalist insurgency as growing from radical deracination, continues to hold sway over the left. Such a view of consciousness can be seen in the "new man" of socialist mythology. It appears in Lenin's theory of revolutionary consciousness as the world view of middle-class, radicalized intellectuals that must be introduced into the working class, and in Karl Kautsky's similar assertion that modern radicalism derives from and is propagated by scientific rationality. This viewpoint also informs Trotsky's contention that the Bolshevik party must be a "moral medium" of its own, constantly protecting itself against ideological contamination and, implicitly, forming a socializing agent for its members in order to detach them from all prior loyalties and connections. In our time, the left view of liberated consciousness as a process of radical separation lies behind Michael Harrington's vision of a "rational, humanist moral code" to replace traditional moral values. It is what Ralph Miliband means when he argues that "the Marxist notion of a 'most radical rupture' with traditional ideas signifies a break with all forms of tradition and must expect to encounter the latter not as friend but as foe." It is the view of social change and its agents succinctly summarized by Stanley Aronowitz in his essay entitled, appropriately enough, "The Working Class: A Break With the Past." According to Aronowitz, all particular identities—of "race and nationality and sex and skill and industry"—are obstacles to the development of homogenized class consciousness. As he puts it, "they constitute antagonisms which still act as a brake on the development of revolutionary consciousness."⁶

5 Marx's comments from the *Critique* are quoted in David McClellan, *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 96; Karl Marx, *The Holy Family* (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishers, 1956), pp. 52-53; Friedrich Engels, "On Historical Materialism," in Feuer, *Marx and Engels*, p. 66; Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, p. 15.

6 Michael Harrington, *The Twilight of Capitalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), p. 291. Ralph Miliband, *Marxism and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 44. Miliband's work simply and clearly explains the Marxist theory of social change and its agents. See also Stanley Aronowitz, "The Working Class: A Break with the Past," in Colin Greer, ed., *Divided Society: The Ethnic Experience in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 312-13.

Mainstream social democratic theory captures moments of genuine revolutionary experience: the discovery of commonality across differences of background; the excitement of breaking with aspects of tradition that repress and block free thought and free association. The basic perspective of the left, finally, is buttressed and reinforced by conventional liberalism itself, with which, of course, it shares common intellectual origins. From the point of view of mainstream liberalism, the spread of universalistic and enlightened ideas comes from the center, not the provinces. Voluntary associations, traditional ethnic identities, institutions like the church and family, and specific ties to place all tend to be seen as hindrances to "modern" and "open" consciousness. Garry Wills expressed this clearly when he wrote: "the smaller the locale, the stricter the code; and this code. . . has always been at odds with the social openness, the chances for initiative, praised by liberals."⁷

Yet the dominant, "progressive" world view fails on many counts. As part of a theory of social change, the argument that radical protest movements emerge because of radical dissociation from traditional backgrounds is simply wrong. Recent social history of factory struggles demonstrates clearly that people draw on a range of ethnic, kinship, religious, and other traditional relations in fighting back and in developing a collective consciousness.⁸ Even within the factory, people are never merely "workers," and other aspects of their identities prove centrally important to insurgency. In addition, a new generation of social historians like Nancy Cott, Ellen Dubois, Alice Rossi, and Sara Evans have probed the origins of feminist consciousness in different periods of American history, and have found that it grew directly out of traditional structures and ideologies that women reshaped for radical purposes. The left view neglects a range of resources that help to explain why ordinary people, steeped in lifelong experiences of degradation, defeat, and humiliation, gain the courage, the confidence, the skills, and the hope to fight back.⁹

⁷ Garry Wills, *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-Made Man* (New York: New American Library, 1969), p. 463.

⁸ Eric Hobsbawm's observation that irreligious fervor has been far more typically a characteristic of socialist movement cadres (those most socialized into the dominant abstract universalism of the tradition) than of the broader socialist, working-class base is certainly noteworthy in this regard. He describes movements that have had generations of secularist and rationalist "education"—and still have not "outgrown" their organic connections. Polish workers, of course, drawing as they did recently on rich religious symbolism, furnish another case in point. Eric Hobsbawm, "Religion and the Rise of Socialism," *Marxist Perspectives*, no. 1 (1978), p. 26.

⁹ In demonstrating the complexity of workplace insurgency and its wellsprings, the work of such authors as David Montgomery, Herbert Gutman, E. P. Thompson, Christopher Hill, Joan Scott, Charles Tilley, and Maurice Agulhon have gone far beyond the classic left theory. There is, to put it simply, a chasm between the argument that working-class revolt springs from a "radical rupture" with traditions, and the studies of actual working-class political movements themselves. The fact that leftist political theory is so at odds with recent social history—much of which is written by self-described Marxists themselves—has almost entirely unremarked gone.

More generally, the left view creates tremendous obstacles to political action and understanding. Seeing emancipation as an intellectual shedding of the past produces strong temptations toward condescension by such theorists, and self-distancing from such important elements of the social fabric as churches, informal forms of association, clubs, ethnic groups, and so forth. In Marx's own time, it led to depictions of the "idiocy of rural life," and to the description of shopkeepers and artisans as "reactionaries who seek to roll back the wheel of history." In our own time, it leads to the customary leftist disinterest in forms of association by which people seek to sustain or to regain communities (the Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist churches, East European immigrant community organizations, to mention a few).

In some practical instances, radicals have overcome such condescension in practice. In fact, exactly such practical supersession of the dominant theoretical tradition has proven the key to moments of leftist success, again and again, around the world. Yet there is tragedy inherent in the situation when orthodox left-wing movements, after having identified themselves with popular traditions and institutions, and having won power, then seek to impose theoretical models of the "new man" and of "modernizing" collectivization. Indeed, this can be seen as the terrible contradiction at work in the internal policies of nations like China and Vietnam.

Although more benign, American leftists are in the main no less mistaken. In a period characterized by the growing search for peoples' reconnections to place, history, and community—for roots—appeals to abstract solidarity become increasingly irrelevant.

America is, in a sense, a nation of the uprooted. We are, after all, a society of immigrants, of people who have escaped oppressions in the Old World or have been torn violently from Africa, from Asia, from Latin America. For most of our history, this understanding of America as new and modern, as divorced from older ties, has been celebrated in the mainstream. Classic liberalism saw freedom as the process of *individual* detachment from traditional relations—as Robert Nisbet has observed, as "emancipation *from* association." And America, as Louis Hartz put it, "begins and ends" in this sort of liberalism: "The master assumption of American political thought has been atomistic social freedom."¹⁰

Yet in the 1960s and 1970s, such images of our destiny began to dissolve. In part, challenges to the notion of freedom as deracination came from the mass movements of blacks, women, Hispanics, and others in the sixties. The popularity of the TV series "Roots" was in itself a spectacular expression of widespread

10 Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 228; Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955), p. 62.

public sympathy with the black quest for a rediscovery of historical and cultural resources. The search for rootedness is also visible in the rise of general ethnic group consciousness; in the public reception given works like Michael Novak's *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*; in the popularity of movies like *The Deer Hunter*, *Rocky*, and *The Godfather*, and of books like *The Immigrants* and *Chesapeake*. It was apparent in the increasing religious involvement: religious institutions were the only ones that did not experience an erosion of public confidence through the 1970s, and more people went to church in 1980 than had in 1970. The search for roots was evident in the growing neighborhood movement. At the end of the decade, every major city in the nation had experienced something of a neighborhood renaissance; the *National Commission on the Neighborhoods Report* in 1979 listed eight thousand community organizations in the country; over one-third of the population claimed to have participated in some form of neighborhood protest, revitalization, or improvement effort.

All such experiences represent raw material for populist insurgency, as millions of Americans have simultaneously sought to rediscover their geographic, historical, and emotional roots, and to defend them against forces threatening their ways of life. To understand why this has happened, and how the populist impulse is fraught with both democratic and authoritarian potentials, we need to take a deeper look at the dynamics of popular activation and at the conviction that an unresponsive elite has dishonored and exploited historically constituted peoples and their cultures.

The concept of a people, or of peoplehood, is a radically different sort of notion than that of class. While class is historically specific, the product of modern industrialization, the notion of "the people" is transhistorical, dating back to antiquity, and has been used by movements and groups with widely varying aims and compositions. While class is a category subject to statistical analysis, and can be depicted with charts and graphs and studied with research questionnaires and computers, the idea of a people is associated with a specific space and is to be understood symbolically rather than abstractly or quantitatively. A people has a point of origin and a moment of birth. This is the case with the Muslim Hegira, with the mythic origin of Athens or Rome, and with our own Declaration of Independence. Such a founding moment allows for celebration and for ritual commemoration sustaining memory, connecting the present to the past. A people also is defined by a common space, settled by ancestors, claimed, defended, and "filled in" by subsequent generations.

The sense of constituted peoplehood is the essence of what Simone Weil meant when she defined roots by saying "a human being has roots by virtue of his real, active, and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future." It is also the insight developed by John Schaar

when he described the psychological bases of patriotism as "a whole way of being in the world captured best by the word 'reverence,' which defines life by its debts: one is what one owes, what one acknowledges as a rightful debt or obligation. The gift of the land, people, language, gods, memories, and customs . . . the very tone and rhythm of a life, the shapes of perception, the texture of its dreams and fears comes from membership in a territorially rooted group."¹¹

Consciousness of a national peoplehood coexists with and is nourished by discrete communities that make up "the whole people"; in turn, each community itself forms a "people" of its own. This dual sense of peoplehood forms a striking theme throughout American black history, as Manning Marable has recently shown. Marable points out that the black elite historically has tended toward an integrationist stance, "while the majority of working class and rural blacks have more often been mobilized to support national ideas and movements," based on the experience and institutions of the black people specifically. The tension between a self-consciousness of separate peoplehood, and an awareness of common ties with other Americans, has always existed within each subgroup. Indeed, the fund of symbols and traditions that blacks share with members of the broader society has furnished vital resources for political struggle. Martin Luther King, Jr., especially was able to mobilize ordinary black people through appeals to the "American heritage." In King's terms, the movement represented "the best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage." It was a great "Crusade for Citizenship," carrying "our whole nation back to the wells of democracy dug deep by the founding fathers." Segregation was an evil "betrayal of the southern heritage" itself.¹²

Yet appeals to the American or to the Southern heritage can have very different meanings, depending on the social position and nature of the group making the appeal. In stark contradiction, Martin Luther King's Crusade for Citizenship represented one kind of populism, and the appeal that George Wallace made to Southern identity represented a populism of a very different sort. Put briefly, traditional relations that constitute a sense of peoplehood are always a complex ensemble, containing parochial, elite, and popular-democratic themes alike.

The sense of aggrieved peoplehood that translates a community's common bonds into an insurgent populism grows from the conviction that an elite has

¹¹ Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 43; John Schaar, "The Case for Patriotism," *New American Review*, May 1973, pp. 63-64.

¹² Manning Marable, "Black Nationalism in the 1970s," *Socialist Review* nos. 50-51 (1980), p. 76. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," in King, *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 99; and King, quoted in William Robert Miller, "The Broadening Horizons," in C. Eric Lincoln, ed., *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Profile* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1970), pp. 50-51.

dishonored and abused a people's sacred spaces, its historical memories and customs, its origins, common territory, and ways of life. Thus there is a kind of class intuition in the populist sensibility—a belief that common people are mistreated by the powerful. But the very vagueness of the populist formulation leads to a political ambiguity and volatility. How such a sense of grievance comes to final expression depends on a number of factors: the dynamics of the society that are responsible for politicizing the communities in the first place; the nature of the communities involved and their relation to others; the ideology, program, and effectiveness of those who seek to organize such discontent into a coherent social force; and the nature of the interior processes and social relations at work in the specific subcommunities that make up “the people.” In particular, when elite groups are able to manipulate parochial themes within the sense of peoplehood without effective contest from those who seek to create broader linkage among discrete oppressed communities, the outcome of a populist mood tends strongly toward authoritarianism.

The interior life of subcommunities as they are mobilized and transformed through the process of forming a social movement is an especially neglected subject, but one that bears directly on the outcome of group protests. Such communities can be understood as comprised of “free social spaces,” complexes of institutions and social networks that retain a degree of insulation from the broader society and from elite control. From the time of Edmund Burke and Alexis de Tocqueville, a long tradition of political and social thought has used the concept of “free” or “autonomous” structures to describe buffers against an authoritarian or centralized state. Through these structures, traditional ways and cultures are transmitted, and independent activities can be organized.

Theorists of “mass society” as well as some of their critics have also used the concept of autonomous structures to analyze the formation of barriers to social movement. Ironically, the dominant tradition of the left has largely shared this view. In mainstream leftist theory, such structures are seen as means to transmit capitalist culture. Douglas Kellner summarized the usual argument: “Hegemonic [capitalist] . . . ideology is transmitted through an ideological apparatus consisting of the family, school, church, media, workplace and social group.”¹³

Thus a fascinating convergence of views about such voluntary, “free” structures has existed from both left and right. Conservatives believed in defending voluntary, traditional autonomous structures against the force of the modern state (though they have tended to slight capitalism's impact on such structures); radicals thought their disruption was necessary for the production of cosmopolitan consciousness. But both traditions saw such institutions as bulwarks of the existing order.

¹³ Douglas Kellner, “Ideology, Marxism and Advanced Capitalism,” *Socialist Review* no. 42 (1978), p. 53.

In fact, empirical studies of those who have actually participated in movements for social change have consistently confounded all such propositions. The reality overlooked by theorists on both sides who see autonomous social structures in a one-sided and static way is their dynamic character; they are free social spaces that, under certain conditions, can turn into breeding grounds for insurgency.¹⁴

In the process of populist revolt, precisely such an activation occurs. Institutions that have for years been broadly functional to the system, reproducing in at least the most general terms its dominant beliefs, become for a time *dysfunctional*. People draw on rich cultural resources and traditions from the past, unearthing subversive themes of protest, dissent, and self-assertion.

Such a process of political activation normally begins as people seek to defend established ways of life or perceived rights that they have come to expect. Social-movement theorist Richard Flacks described the usual pattern: "Most commonly, popular movements arise as efforts to resist threats to established patterns of everyday life. Movements are particularly apt to occur when these threats are seen as the fault of those in authority."¹⁵ In turn, how such resources are sorted out proves the crucial variable. Whether popular democratic themes of civic idealism, cooperation, religiously motivated action on behalf of the oppressed, pluralism, and tolerance come to be distinguished from elite themes of rapacious individualism, hedonism, and contempt for others depends on the evolution of groups as they move from resistance to self-conscious opposition to centers of power.

In *democratic* populist movements, as people are moved to activism in *defense* of their rights, traditions, and institutions, they change. Richard Flacks, and others like E. J. Hobsbawm, have pointed out that in the course of protest movements, goals can change. Expanding somewhat on a typology of social movement once suggested by Barrington Moore, "democratic movement" here means the struggle by a self-conscious group for control over its destiny within a given setting and also the notion of free and cooperative participation. As such, it can be contrasted with forms of authoritarian communal movements on the one hand—for example, certain cults; and it is also different from "libertarian"

14 Sara Evans and I have used the term *social space* rather than *mediating institutions* (or similar terms out of the "resistance" school of social thought) to highlight another dimension of those networks and relations that form the primary base of social movement: their character as part of "lived," daily reality in people's experience. The concept of social space grows from traditions of social geography, ethnology, and phenomenology (writers such as Emile Durkheim, who first used the concept in the 1890s to describe the social environment independent of the physical setting in *The Division of Labor in Society*).

15 Richard Flacks, "Making History vs. Making Life," *Working Papers for a New Society*, Summer 1974, p. 60.

movements on the other, like portions of what is called the new right, resting upon a marketplace, highly individualistic model of human beings. They discover in themselves and their traditions new resources and potentials. They repair their capacity to work together for collective problem solving. They find out new political facts about the world, they build networks and seek contacts with other groups of the powerless to forge a broader group identity, and this whole process helps them to clarify basic power relations in the society. In sum, they deepen the meaning of what they are doing, from understanding it merely as a protest against threat to coming to see the need for a struggle for new conceptions of rights. This kind of change is the identifying mark, specifically, of a democratic movement that seeks a transformation in power relations, not simply a return to past conditions or the replacement of one elite with another.

In class society, the possibilities for free and democratic processes are always relative. Structures are contradictory, crossed by competing ideologies and values. In contemporary forms of organizing, organizers often describe the communities they enter as enormously volatile; indeed, the same neighborhood can be mobilized by extreme right-wing groups to battle blacks or welfare recipients, or it can be organized by progressive groups that build cross-racial and cross-income alliances against centers of wealth and power, depending on who is there "first" and how attuned they are to local values and folkways.

Understanding the subtle, shifting nature of the experiences by which people change, individually and collectively, begins to clarify and to render comprehensible many dimensions of the populist impulse and its possibilities. Depending upon how the institutional building blocks of a contemporary populism develop over time, and on how they link up with other groups—and depending upon who organizes them and upon what the organizers' program and vision is about—many different outcomes are possible. The vision of the American destiny put forth by populism can be inclusive, open, and cooperative. Or it can be closed, static, fearful, and bellicose.

As the 1980s begin, massive popular discontent and many different forms of resistance have spread throughout the society. This unrest has been precipitated by a combination of factors: slower economic growth, inflation, the growth of an aggressive and enormously powerful corporate lobby at every level of government, declining urban services, deep social and cultural dislocations, and a dangerous, volatile world environment. In such a situation, the realization of the *democratic* potential of populism will require the intervention, organizing skills, and leadership of progressives and radicals with a long-range vision of qualitative, cooperative change, complete with an analysis of the social structure and economic system informed by leftist theory. Any movement for achieving "rule by the people" must recognize that trade unions will be essential

to such a movement, as Marxists have long insisted.

Yet for all its insufficiency, and granted the need to appropriate critical insights from the left, the populist idea of peoplehood nonetheless includes themes and intuitions that are indispensable for democratic politics in the 1980s, and that need to be used to rework the categories of the left. In the American context, this idea provokes a language, a set of symbols and themes far more powerful than traditional left or even liberal terminology. American history and tradition, like that of any nation, embodies contradictions between cooperative and rapaciously individualist, democratic and authoritarian elements. To reclaim the best in American traditions and history is to rediscover the popular democratic heritage: our nation's civic idealism, our practices of mutual aid and self-help, our religious wellsprings of social justice.

The notion of "a people" also broadens the constituencies that can be enlisted in the effort to democratize our society. To understand that our very peoplehood is abused by modern capitalism is to understand that we are entering a stage in history when corporations have unleashed a major assault on the historical bases of bourgeois respectability. Peoplehood implies sympathizing with the outrage of homeowners at Love Canal, the anguish of Republican farmers driven off their lands, the rage of Christian evangelicals at the collapse of moral standards in the face of the deceits of "Playboy morality." A democratic understanding of American peoplehood asserts that our nation's finest ideals are far better than rapacious individualism, hedonism, and contempt for moral standards of any kind, and that a new crusade for citizenship, for our democratic heritage, spans many traditional political divisions.

There still exists, for most Americans, belief in the need for government as an instrument of justice, as a civic meeting ground and public agency, and as a means for fighting corporate power. Yet there exists as well a deep, and legitimate, anger at a government that violates the idea of government of the people and by the people.

A contemporary populist politics must understand what the nineteenth-century populists took as a matter of course. To propose, with any prospect of broad support, new governmental initiatives, a political movement has to demonstrate that it is fully aware of the dangers from existing government and of its potential for tyranny.

The left—in America and around the world—faces an odd and frustrating contradiction. Marxist and left perspectives, *as criticism* of contemporary society, have gained unprecedented prestige, even within as conservative an intellectual establishment as that which exists in the United States; yet left-wing politics are on the retreat: the left is marginalized in the United States, reduced to lifeless ritual in the Soviet Union, discredited by the genocidal policies and internecine feuding in Asian nations that were at the emotional center of the worldwide left movement only a decade ago.

In the contemporary world, left-wing criticism has penetrated deep into the dynamics of modern life, showing how the private accumulation process that drives large-scale economic institutions works devastation on human beings on the job and in broader civic affairs. Marxist analysis of the class structure of our nation goes far toward illuminating the basic ways people are organized and shaped by capitalist institutions. Yet the left, inheritor of a one-dimensional view of human motivation that itself derives from the capitalist marketplace, has failed to develop any adequate theory of social movement and of culture as a vital, living resource for democratic action.

To regain the offensive in the 1980s, democratic radicalism needs a new understanding of the vitality, creativity, and democratic processes to be found within old forms as well as new ones. In short, it needs a reconnection with the wellsprings of civic idealism, religious belief, and the democratic heritage that time after time have inspired ordinary people to revolt against the centers of wealth and power in American history. Such a reconnection means the recovery of a democratic understanding of American peoplehood, and a shattering of the marketplace image of human beings within which the left itself has remained imprisoned.