

Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort by Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons. New York: Guilford Press, 2000.

BRIAN TONGIER
University of California-Los Angeles

In *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close For Comfort*, Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons analyze the dominant narratives and themes of right-wing populist discourse in a single, sweeping text. Berlet has previously (with Margaret Quigley) addressed the issue of “regressive populism,” drawing from Michael Kazin and Margaret Canovan to argue that regressive populism leaves entrenched power holders and discriminatory narratives in place while scapegoating more vulnerable targets (Berlet and Quigley 1995). Berlet and Lyons’ new work refines this model, classifying right-wing populism as “a repressive populist movement motivated or defined centrally by a backlash against liberation movements, social reform, or revolution” (Berlet and Lyons 2000, p. 5). Right-wing populism draws from fears of the left and generally opposes the government as a redistributor of wealth and power yet supports the government as an enforcer of order. This pattern is not universal, however, as certain right-wing populist appeals to “the people” often support socially reactionary ideas while supporting economic radicalism (including wealth redistribution, although this redistribution is often only for the “volk”) (Dobratz and Shanks-Meilie, 1997).

Berlet and Lyons’ central thesis is that these appeals to a limited conception of “the people” do not just come from right-wing extremists—they are part of the American political mainstream and have been from the colonial era through the Jacksonians to the Reagan Republicans. The dominant discourse of right-wing populism presented by Berlet and Lyons involves the caricature of the “elite parasites above” (such as “Jews, Secular Humanists, and government bureaucrats”) and the stereotyping of the “lazy and sinful parasites below” (such as “people of color, immigrants, and homosexuals”) (Berlet and Lyons 2000). Berlet and Lyons’ analysis focuses upon

this model and the multiple narratives that provide the content for these caricatures and stereotypes, such as white nationalism, Christian nationalism, how this model influences the “culture wars,” “producerism” (beliefs in “good productive capital” and “bad investment capital”), and “millennialism” (apocalyptic worldviews—especially those centered around the year 2000). Throughout their analysis, Berlet and Lyons criticize “centrist-extremist” theories that blame a few anti-democratic agents for right-wing populism and instead argue that these anti-democratic appeals come from the anti-democratic values inherent in the American political mainstream. For the groups, models, and narratives examined in the text, Berlet and Lyons provide a clear perspective of how right-wing populism directs anger against established social powers against vulnerable targets, thus reinforcing unjust social privilege through a populist discourse.

Past studies of right-wing populism note that most historic appeals to “the people” in the United States have regarded “the people” as a specific white Christian “volk” in “a white mans’ country” (Dobratz and Shanks-Meilie 1997). In his analysis of American history, Lyons notes the influence of right-wing populist models and narratives in the colonial era, during the American Revolution, as a fundamental basis for Jacksonian “democracy,” in the anti-immigrant furor of the 1890’s, among fascist and authoritarian social movements during the New Deal, in Richard Nixon’s appeals to “the silent majority” (Kazin 1995), and in the Reagan Republican’s use of populist rhetoric (Berman 1994, Drury 1997). Uniting this historical analysis is Lyons’ focus on how appeals to “the real people” and “one-hundred percent Americanism” grounded and justified this scapegoating and repression (Berlet and Lyons 2000). The transition from the Old Right to the New Right during the 1950’s and 1960’s segues into Berlet’s analysis of several mainstream and marginal right-wing populist actors and groups through these same narratives (see also Dobratz and Shanks-Meilie 1997, Betz 1994, and Betz and Immerfall 1998). Concentrating on how the previously-mentioned themes pervade the New Right from the militia movement to the Christian Coalition and the

Republican and Democratic parties, Berlet examines these repressive narratives in notable depth.

Despite a clear critique of centrist-extremist theory, Berlet and Lyons do not completely refute “centrist / extremist” perspectives (see, for example, Lipset and Raab 1978). Berlet and Lyons do show that both the overall right-wing populist model of caricature and scapegoating and the narratives that uphold unjust privilege underlie all of American history and politics, but the extent to which these models and narratives are part of the political mainstream remains in doubt. Most of the clearly anti-democratic groups Berlet and Lyons analyze in great critical depth are either in the past or are Christian dominionists, white nationalists or militia adherents—groups that centrist-extremist theorists would simply be able to dismiss as “a few bad apples” far removed from the “democratic present.” From a “centrist-extremist” perspective, the text reveals that the Republicans and Democrats do invoke these themes, but in a *less extreme and more centrist manner than right-wing extremists*. The text does not, therefore, completely convince the skeptical reader that this model and these narratives are part of the *system* rather than the actions of certain social actors.

Right-Wing Populism in America also does not analyze the populist appeals of the secular and libertarian right to the same extent as the other sectors of the right. Libertarian rhetoric draws from right-wing populist themes by promoting the notion that “the market” is a “perfect reflection of the popular will” and that any attempt to regulate such a perfectly democratic system is elitist (Frank 2000). The very notions that “deregulation equals democratization” and that the people make up a populist “groundswell” calling for an end to government regulation represent perhaps the most dominant populist narrative of the American political mainstream (see Friedman 2000). Although many aspects of the model and narratives presented by Berlet and Lyons apply to libertarianism—especially in appeals to “the people” and opposition to “elitist bureaucrats and tax-and-spend leftists”—many aspects of their model and narratives do not apply as cleanly as

they do to other rightists. Libertarians often shun racism, sexism, homophobia, and “traditional Judeo-Christian morality” and mock traditional businessmen of Old Right conservatism as hopelessly “unhip” and socially reactionary (Frank 2000). Much of the libertarian right also eschews racial and ethnic scapegoating while concentrating its attacks upon both “old business” and “big government” as equal parts of the elitist establishment, thus partially targeting the “power elite” and simultaneously reinforcing this same elite.

An ambitious project, *Right Wing Populism in America* successfully summarizes the dominant themes and narratives that pervade much of right in the United States. In its analysis of the political mainstream, however, the text could more clearly reveal both right-wing populism as “part of the system” and the secular conservative narratives and models that differ from those of the far right yet still rely upon populist rhetoric to ultimately defend the American elite. Combining both of these approaches through an analysis of libertarianism’s populist appeals and repressive effects would explicitly show how mainstream conservative populism reinforces the status quo of unjust social privilege. Such a critique would account for the entire spectrum of the American right and would more effectively reveal right-wing populism as truly “too close for comfort.”

Works Cited

- Berlet, Chip and Margaret Quigley. 1995. “Theocracy and White Supremacy: Behind the Culture War to Restore Traditional Values.” From Berlet, ed. *Eyes Right! Challenging the Right-Wing Backlash*. Boston: South End Press.
- Berlet, Chip and Matthew Lyons. 2000. *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort*. New York: Guilford.
- Berman, William C. 1994. *America’s Right Turn: From Nixon to Clinton*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.
- Betz, Hans-Georg. 1994. *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.
- Betz, Hans-Georg and Stefan Immerfall. 1998. *The New Politics of the Right*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.

- Boyte, Harry C., Heather Booth, and Steve Max. 1986. *Citizen Action and the New American Populism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Boyte, Harry C. and Riessman, Frank, eds. 1986. *The New Populism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Dobratz, Betty A. and Shanks-Meilie, Stephanie L. 1997. *The White Separatist Movement in the United States*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.
- Drury, Shadia. *Leo Strauss and the American Right*. 1997. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Frank, Thomas. 2000. *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy*. New York: Doubleday.
- Friedman, Thomas. 2000. *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Federici, Michael P. 1991. *The Challenge of Populism: The Rise of Right-Wing Democratism in Postwar America*. New York: Praeger.
- Kazin, Michael. 1995. *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin and Earl Raab. 1978. *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America: 1790-1977*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.