John F. Conway

The Nature of Populism: A Clarification

In "Populism: A Qualified Defence" (SPE 5), John Richards offers us both a theoretical schema for dealing with populism and "a case for the populist political style" (p. 5) — a style that he commends to the Canadian Left. His central purpose is to save the New Democratic Party (NDP) with what he calls "left populism." While I have dealt with many of Richards' theoretical missteps and factual misrepresentations elsewhere, it is worth re-treading some of the ground for a number of reasons. First, Richards continues the practice of gutting populism of its useful historical and theoretical content, thereby stripping us of a very valuable analytical tool. Second, Richards actively distorts the Marxist tradition in analyses of populism, setting up a number of straw-men which he knocks down with smug ease. Third, Richards proposes that the Canadian Left resurrect populism as a central focus of its future political project, thus diverting the Left from the essential tasks of redefining socialism and radical socialist democracy, in favour of rummaging among skeletons in the historical closet.

Theoretical Flaws
The most glaring flaw in Richards' case is the undefended assertion that "the ultimate test of any definition is how closely it corresponds with ordinary language usage." Hence phenomena are populist.
because "both political participants and observers" (p. 6) call them populist. The problem with this is surely self-evident. By this rule, we might be forced to concede that Trudeau is a socialist, Levesque is a social democrat, trade unions are greedy and grasping, and the NDP is the slavish tool of organized labour (this would be shocking news for trade unionists in both British Columbia and Saskatchewan). It is clearly incumbent on the critical scholar to search behind words and labels for deeper truths and realities, not simply to echo popular usage. Not so, according to Richards, who asserts that by failing to embrace the "ordinary language usage" of populism, we "violate common use of the term." Yet the whole point of his essay is that there is just no common use of the term. In fact, the term is often used to characterize widely disparate political and social phenomena.

Undaunted, Richards undertakes a definition of the "ordinary language usage" of populism. The term is applied to "political movements that emphasize ... the role of the 'people' as opposed to elites" (p. 6). Furthermore, a movement must have three ingredients before being declared a cake baked in the populist mould: (1) it must define a broad base of support; (2) it must engage in a political dialogue "in terms of a subset of the ideas of the indigenous popular culture;" and (3) it must criticize concentrated power and advocate "wide disbursement of that power to the 'people’" (pp. 5-6). While one can concede that the above are characteristic of populist movements, one wonders how uniquely defining they are. Such a set of ingredients could probably be found not only in movements most widely conceded to be "populist," but also in the following: the Liberal Party under Mackenzie and Laurier; Pattullo's Liberal Party in British Columbia; Hepburn's Liberal Party in Ontario; the Reconstructionists; the many socialist and labour parties leading up to the founding of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF); the Manitoba Liberal-Progressive Party; the Depression period of the Dunphy Union Nationalist; the Communist Party of Canada during at least some of its twists and turns; the early Diefenbaker Tory party; the federal NDP under Douglas (and to a lesser extent under Lewis); and, indeed, the Trudeau Liberal Party under some of its more wondrous re-births during the last fifteen years. Later, Richards sophisticated his theoretical schema. He talks of pure populism and hybrid populism, of populism as a facade, of left populism and right populism. Indeed, the qualifications become so endless that populism may refer to any mode of governing, other than the divine right of kings. John Richards is not alone in this tendency to render the term populism analytically useless by applying it loosely to a whole variety of political and social phenomena. The work of Ionescu and Gellner remains one of the best examples of the concept's use to include everything from peasant movements to "popular" military governments, to the rhetoric of politicians of dubious sincerity. And the disease persists. Canovan's more recent book proposes a typology of no less than seven categories of populism. Included are three kinds of agrarian populism (farmer, peasant and intellectual) and four kinds of political populism (populist dictatorship, populist democracy, reactionary populism and politicians' populism). One can anticipate immediately the insurmountable analytical programs associated with a notion of populism that includes the cynical platitudes of a Jimmy Carter, aspects of Maoism, the phenomenon of Peronism, agrarian radicalism, near-fascism, and varieties of military dictatorship.

Much of the source of this confused thinking can be traced to the tendency of such analyses of populism to focus on studies of rhetoric, expressions of belief, and materials published by individuals or movements to which the label has been ascribed. Obviously this kind of material must be studied. But such research must also be linked simultaneously and critically to studies of actions taken, groups and classes mobilized (for, against, or not moved at all), programs and laws promulgated and implemented when such movements win power in a jurisdiction, and so on. As well, such verbal offerings to the research altar must also be linked to studies of actual social structure and political economic developments which impact upon, and are affected by, social movements. Textual analysis and word spinning (writing words about words about words) will not lead to clear insights regarding the nature of populism — indeed, the predominance of such an approach has threatened to turn the concept into a garbage can of political historiography.

**Marxist Straw-Men**

In an effort to refute the classical Marxist approach to populism, Richards sets up at least four straw-men. At one point, he defines Lenin's position as follows. Populism is

the political expression in an age of industrial capitalism of marginal classes — usually, but not always, petit bourgeois — caught between the working class and the bourgeoisie. Here attention is upon a presumed similarity in class situation among adherents to populism: similarity of ideology and of organizational form from case to case is secondary" (p. 6).

Then we are treated to this gem: "Marxist historicism has tended to dismiss rural based political movements as emotional Canute-like
bourgeoisie. The reasons for this are clear. The agrarian petite bourgeoisie was, during the early stages of industrialism, the largest single class and, as democratic reforms were won, one of the most politically organized and active. But populism can also be expressed by small businessmen such as the Reconstructionists or, indeed, by the new middle classes of advanced capitalism; however, their expressions, representing weak fragments of the traditional petite bourgeoisie, or new elements not involved directly in production, have never matched the appeal and popularity achieved historically by agrarian petit bourgeois expressions of populism. Furthermore, the expression of populism clearly varies by region, nation and historical period. The mass upheavals led by populist movements in Russia, the United States and Canada occurred in a specific historical period — the final triumph of urban, industrial capitalism and the decisive and irreversible onset of the decline of rural, small-holder capitalism. Populist expressions in the Third World continue to vary, depending, for example, on the modernization projects characteristic of particular countries, the colonial struggle and the legacy of colonialism and neo-colonialism, and the degree of national coherence.

But, the Marxist argument goes, the class essence of populism will remain basic and similar to its classical forms. Even today in the advanced capitalist world, expressions of populism continue on the fringes of politics — for instance, the National Farmers' Union, the Canadian Agricultural Movement and the Farm Survival Association in rural Canada; and elements in the Prairie wings of the Tory and NDP parties. Even the Prairie and Newfoundland working classes, so recently removed from petit bourgeois production, often express populist political themes. But the historical era of populism is over in the advanced world — the petite bourgeoisie, especially the agrarian petite bourgeoisie, lost the class struggle and has had to content itself with winning this or that concession.

It should be pointed out that such a perspective on populism is not uniquely Marxist. Many non-Marxist political economists embrace a similar perspective. Analysing politics in terms of economics and class was not a Marxist invention — bourgeois political economists did it long before Marx, and have continued that tradition. There is a vast literature — Marxist and non-Marxist — that embraces this analytical framework. Even Richards seems to recognize this when he notes that “populism is more likely to emerge from a petite bourgeoisie than from most other classes and thus a concern with the petit bourgeois origins of many populist movements is not misplaced” (p. 6). But he retreats from that insight and proceeds to suggest that only Marxists emphasize that point of view.
Many non-Marxist political economists will be quite offended. For Richards, all political-economic approaches to populism are Marxist simply because they analyze politics in terms of economics. Mackenzie King, who was an artist in analysing politics as economics (witness his masterful handling of the Progressives through a series of vital economic concessions to the agrarian petite bourgeoisie), would have been very annoyed.

"Right" versus "Left" Populism

In fairness, Richards' primary purpose in his essay is not to provide new theoretical insights into populism, but to make "a case for the populist political style" (p. 5). He calls on the Left to "take up the indigenous populist strands and weave them into alternative designs" (p. 26). Central to his case is his distinction between what he calls "left" and "right" populism. According to Richards, the New Right has adopted populist rhetoric in defence of a right-wing politics; the Left must do likewise or continue to suffer a "quasi-marginal status" (p. 26).

Let us deal first of all with the notion of "left" and "right" populism. Richards provides us with four areas in which left and right populism distinguish themselves. These areas are derived almost uniquely from populism on the Canadian Prairies, most notably from the struggles of the CCF in Saskatchewan and the Social Credit League in Alberta. But, he suggests, there is some universality. First, the nature of the electoral alliance: left populism called for farmer-labour co-operation; right populism called for an all-class regional alliance. Second, the extent of the critique of capitalism: left populism's critique was more general; right populism focussed largely on finance capitalism. Third, the scope of the advocated reforms: left populism argued for more extensive structural reforms and an active use of government against concentrated power; right populism rejected government intervention beyond credit reform and market reform. Fourth, organizational form: left populism more generally came from below, especially from rural co-operatives; right populism had shallower roots in such organizations and tended to be less democratic and participatory.

While I find these characterizations more or less acceptable, I would hesitate to state that one can clearly apply them to particular organizations with any great continuity. Richards simply assumes that the CCF was left populist, as was the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA), and that the Alberta Social Credit League was right populist. The actual evidence is much less clear. The UFA government record was not at all clearly "left" — one would find "conservative" a more apt term. The UFA rank-and-file organization tended to be more "left," but the government largely ignored it and imposed rigid discipline on UFA members of the legislature. And, contrary to Richards, the UFA never represented urban labour — the Labour Party did. Further, co-operation between the UFA and labour was far from good (the UFA government invited a Labour member into the Cabinet from 1921-26, but stopped the practice thereafter; the UFA government's record on strikes in the coal mines was abysmal). Even when the UFA organization affiliated with the CCF, the government did not enthusiastically embrace CCF doctrine in the 1935 election; that task was largely left to CCF-Labour candidates. And the Social Credit movement was not all that clearly "right" from the outset. Indeed, Aberhart's era (1935-43), particularly his first term (1935-40), could be just as readily characterized as "left" (his attack on finance capital and its corporate and federal government allies; his social, health, education, and labour reforms; etc.). Labour supported Aberhart during his early struggles, as did the Communist Party. Indeed, Aberhart was re­bated repeatedly for appearing in public with labour leaders and known Communists. Aberhart's 1935 and 1940 election campaigns, against the "Fifty Big Shots" of finance capital were, at the time, more "left" than "right." Certainly though, after Aberhart's death in 1943, Manning moved the party very quickly rightward, isolating the more radical elements, and re-shaped the party into a traditional conservative party.

Similarly, the CCF cannot be clearly called "left" populist throughout its career — the remarkable twists and turns in the Saskatchewan CCF program from 1932 to 1944, and then more dramatically after 1948, cannot all be confidently described as "left." The fact that the CCF in Saskatchewan reluctantly transformed itself into a social democratic party, while the Alberta Social Credit League went conservative, is not a sufficient basis for insisting that one was clearly "left" and the other clearly "right" from the outset. They both zigzagged and the answers as to why each did so can be found more readily in studies of reality, not rhetoric. Similarly, the Progressive Party had "left" and "right" elements within it — indeed, the New National Policy platform itself zigzags from left to right throughout its many planks. Clearly, populism can be "left" or "right," but usually a particular populist movement is both simultaneously, never clearly one or the other; at times "left" content comes to the fore; at other times "right" content comes to the fore. I can think of no clear case of a "left" populism or a "right" populism.
Conclusion
The whole point of Richards' essay, of course, is that Richards wants the Canadian Left to become "left" populist. He wants the NDP to become "left" populist. This would be a retrogression. No matter how disillusioned the Left becomes with the NDP's right-wing social democracy, to advocate that the NDP must go back to a populist stance would be a decisive historical retreat. But it will never happen. Richards' formula for the "Left," or for the NDP, may have some temporary success on the Prairies or in Newfoundland, but it will not obtain a serious hearing in British Columbia or Ontario.

The point that most deeply concerns me is Richards' unwillingness to discuss the way ahead for socialism in Canada. Those on the Canadian Left concerned, as Richards so obviously is, about democracy, bureaucracy, de-centralization, the legacy of Stalinism, and the failure of right-wing social democracy, ought to focus their energies on redefining a Canadian variant of socialism and new versions of socialist democratic forms which not only maintain the limited democracy of liberal capitalism but strive to deepen and extend that democracy. Surely this is the way to go.

Notes
