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American Populism from the Populist Revolt to Trumpism

Conceptual Change and Political Implications

Master's thesis in Language Studies with Teacher Education

Supervisor: Ane Øien-Vikaune

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Abstract

This thesis is a conceptual analysis of American populism, which aims to examine how the meaning and role of populism has changed throughout American history. This thesis compares and contrasts three crucial populist movements in American history: The Populist Revolt of the late 19th century; the Conservative Right of the 20th century; and the Modern Right of the 21st century. I rely on the methodology of conceptual history in order to examine how certain conceptual relatives of populism, such as *capitalism*, *liberalism* and *neoliberalism*, have shaped the meaning and role of American populism throughout the centuries. Through in-depth analysis of the sociopolitical contexts of these three periods, this thesis demonstrates how 19th century grassroots populism has developed into a political force which has dominated national politics in the 21st century. The analysis also demonstrates how populism has embodied issues with political representation; how populism has had positive and negative effects on American democracy; and how populism has served to change the direction of American politics historically.

Sammendrag

Denne masteroppgaven er en konseptuell analyse av Amerikansk populisme, som tar sikte på å analysere hvordan populisme har skiftet betydning og hatt ulike roller gjennom amerikansk historie. Oppgaven sammenligner tre viktige populistiske bevegelser i amerikansk historie: Det 'populistiske opprøret' på tampen av det 19. århundre; den 'konservative høyrebevegelsen' fra det 20. århundre; og den 'moderne høyrebevegelsen' fra det 21. århundre. Jeg avvender konseptuell historie som metode med sikte på å analysere hvordan betydningen og rollen til populisme har blitt formet av ulike 'konseptuelle slektninger' (slik som *kapitalisme*, *liberalisme*, og *nyliberalisme*) i løpet av amerikansk historie. Gjennom grundig analyse av de sosiopolitiske kontekstene til disse tre bevegelsene, viser denne oppgaven hvordan populisme har utviklet seg fra å være et grasrot-fenomen i det 19. århundre til å bli et politisk fenomen som har dominert amerikansk politikk i det 21. århundre. Analysen viser også hvordan populisme har dreid seg om skjev politisk representasjon; hvordan populisme har hatt positiv og negativ innvirkning på det amerikanske demokratiet; og hvordan populisme har bidratt til å endre retningen på amerikansk politikk historisk.

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1.Introduction

Populism is a contested concept which has been described by Mudde and Kaltwasser as “one of the main political buzzwords of the 21st century.” Populism has been used to label contrasting regimes and political movements around the world; consequently, what populism represents, depends on where we look. There is nothing peculiar, however, about populism being ambiguous and contested; indeed, that is what makes it a concept.¹

This thesis aims to analyze how populism in the United States has developed conceptually and how it has played different roles in American society throughout history. Populism has been a significant political force in America ever since the founding of the nation, but the term was first coined in the late 19th century during the Populist Revolt.² Consequently, my analysis of populism begins with the Populist Revolt and traces the development of the concept through the 20th century and into the 21st. I analyze the concept of populism through various conceptual relatives which saturate populism with meaning and which show how populism has served to challenge different political and economic doctrines. Populism has become an increasingly contested phenomenon due to its growing significance as a political force in the 21st century. By reviewing the conceptual history of populism, I aim to broaden our understanding of the concept as a political phenomenon and add more nuance to current debates about its political role. I will answer the following research question: *How has the meaning and role of populism changed from the Populist Revolt to Trump?*

I have chosen to compare and contrast the Populist Revolt of the 19th century with the Conservative Right³ of the 20th century and the Modern Right⁴ of the 21st. I have selected these three periods as a basis for my comparison of populism because they allow me to analyze populism extensively over the course of three centuries. The Populist Revolt serves as a natural starting point for my analysis due to its historical significance as the first populist movement in American history. Secondly, this movement establishes the concept as a left-wing, grassroots phenomenon which sets it apart from the subsequent movements of my analysis. The Conservative Right shows how populism adopted a right-wing profile, which greatly contrasts the previous movement, illustrating new tendencies in terms of meaning and

¹ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1-2.

² ‘The Populist Revolt’ is used by Robert McMath and refers to the 19th century people’s movement of farmers and laborers which manifested in the late 1870s. Lawrence Goodwyn uses the label ‘the agrarian revolt’, but because the populists were not only farmers, I employ ‘the Populist Revolt’ to my thesis.

³ ‘The Conservative Right’ is employed in this thesis to label right-wing populism in the 20th century.

⁴ ‘The Modern Right’ is employed in this thesis to describe the Tea Party movement and Trumpism, and distinguishes right-wing populism of the 21st century from that of the 20th.

political influence. The Tea Party movement was a precursor to Trumpism and therefore provides important clues about Trumpism as a populist phenomenon. I have chosen to end my thesis with a discussion of Trumpism because it shows how populism has developed from a grassroots phenomenon into a potent political force which dominated American politics for more than four years.

My thesis contributes to the research on American populism by tracing the conceptual development through time, using conceptual history as methodology. Scholarly contributions to American populism tend to focus heavily on social history without explicitly addressing how the concept itself has changed and how it has influenced the sociopolitical contexts differently. By linking the development of the concept to key conceptual relatives, I aim to provide a clear outline of how populism has changed its meaning and played different roles throughout American history. For instance, by linking American populism in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries to the concepts of *capitalism*, *liberalism* and *neoliberalism*⁵ respectively, my thesis establishes in a clear manner how populism has been influenced by, and responded to, these doctrines. This approach also represents a unique application of conceptual history as a methodology to the study of concepts which is both clear and consistent. Furthermore, I analyze the sociopolitical contexts of each period extensively, providing in depth analysis of three crucial populist moments in American history, which are compared to one another in a concluding chapter in order to detect continuity and change.

1.1 Methodology: Conceptual History

Conceptual history combines social history and the history of concepts, which allows the researcher to examine how the meaning of concepts has changed and how they have influenced society historically. According to Kai Vogelsang, the purpose of conceptual history has been “to counter two dominating tendencies in historical studies, namely (1) the history of ideas that disregarded socio-political contexts, and (2) the history of events that had no concern for underlying structures.”⁶

Consequently, I have chosen the approach of conceptual history because it allows me to study both how American society has been influenced by populism *and* how populism has been influenced by sociopolitical contexts. Secondly, concepts are undefined and subject to historical change, and conceptual history allows me to trace the historical development of the concept and review its meaning and role in regard to different sociopolitical contexts.

⁵ All concepts subject to analysis are italicized for emphasis.

⁶ Kai Vogelsang, “Conceptual History: A Short Introduction,” *Oriens Extremus* 51 (2012): 16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24047785>

Populism is currently an ill-reputed concept, and by studying its historical development, we can gain insights into why this is the case and whether this has always been the case. Reinhart Koselleck is an important contributor to the academic tradition, and my methodology will be informed by his contributions. I also seek inspiration from more contemporary conceptual historians such as Kai Vogelsang and Jan Ifversen.

Koselleck argues that concepts are defined by their ambiguity and demand interpretation, as opposed to words which can be clearly defined. According to Koselleck, “a word becomes a concept when a single word is needed that contains – and is indispensable for articulating – the full range of meaning from a given sociopolitical context”.⁷ Importantly, Kai Vogelsang stresses that “conceptual history does not aim to rectify ‘inherent confusions’ of historical mindsets” – the purpose of conceptual history is to understand the logic of concepts as they correspond to sociopolitical contexts.⁸

Concepts reflect the sociopolitical context they emerge from, but they also have the power to shape society. Vogelsang contends that the essence of conceptual history is the mutual influence between concepts and social structures, which entails that concepts both mirror *and* shape society as they are adopted and employed by a society.⁹ According to Koselleck, “a concept is not simply indicative of the relations which it covers; it is also a factor within them. Each concept establishes a particular horizon for potential experience and conceivable theory, and in this way sets a limit”.¹⁰ Consequently, concepts influence how society perceives itself and open up a potentiality for change by “providing models for action and increasing the likelihood of their usage.”¹¹

Jan Ifversen outlines how concepts can be studied according to two dimensions: the representational and referential dimension. My methodological approach will be informed by these two directions. The representational dimension focuses on the relationship between word and concept, which is studied linguistically and semantically. It refers to what words mean individually and how various words combine in order to express the full meaning of a concept.¹² By examining the representational dimension, we aim to determine “how a

⁷ Reinhart Koselleck, “Introduction and Prefaces to the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*,” trans. Michaela Richter, *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 6, no. 1 (2011): 19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23730905>. The word ‘state’, for instance, refers to various elements such as territorial sovereignty, citizenship, legislation, and military force, which turn it into a concept. See Koselleck, “*Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*,” 20

⁸ Vogelsang, “Conceptual History,” 16.

⁹ Vogelsang, 16.

¹⁰ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 86.

¹¹ Urs Stäheli cited in Vogelsang, “Conceptual History,” 16

¹² Jan Ifversen, “About Key Concepts and How to Study Them,” *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 6, no. 1 (2011): 70. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23730907>

particular concept under study acquires its meaning within a semantic field.”¹³ A concept’s ‘semantic field’ “designates the relations between concepts” and is based on the idea that conceptual relatives constitute semantic subsystems of meaning.¹⁴

My analysis of populism and its semantic field will be restricted to the study of *two* conceptual relatives which I find essential to the meaning of populism at a given time in history. This establishes the basis for comparing populism at different conjunctures in American history in order to detect semantic changes. Additionally, the three concepts *the people*, *the elite* and the *general will* are fundamental to the populist tradition and will be revisited throughout my analysis as a whole; the aim is to analyze how the meanings of these concepts have changed or remained consistent, and how that in turn has affected the meaning of populism.¹⁵

The referential dimension pertains to the relationship between concept and object.¹⁶ This dimension addresses how concepts function as factors within society, thus allowing historians to study the historical role of concepts.¹⁷ The study of the referential dimension, and the historical role of American populism, will be given special emphasis in my analysis. In order to examine the referential dimension, I will analyze how the conceptual relatives of populism have been used politically and to what effect. The concept *producerism*, for instance, was used to mobilize farmers under a shared set of beliefs. On the other hand, by identifying counter-concepts, or polar-opposites, we can detect how concepts, such as *monopolism*, have been used to exclude or disqualify certain members of society.¹⁸ The conceptual relatives also establish the historical contexts more accurately, which provides a basis for analyzing how populism has served to challenge certain political or economic doctrines, such as *capitalism*, *liberalism* and *neoliberalism*.

1.2 Historiography and Core Concepts of Populism

My analysis will be based on both secondary sources and primary sources. A combination of secondary and primary sources is necessary in order to trace the development of populism as a concept in relation to specific historical contexts. I rely on secondary sources because they are an effective way to achieve this goal, and because they offer precise and accessible accounts

¹³ Ifversen, “About Key Concepts,” 73.

¹⁴ Ifversen, 71. This reflects how the word ‘state’ is made up of various conceptual relatives, as illustrated above.

¹⁵ Because populists do not identify as populists and rarely use the concept themselves, the study of conceptual relatives is particularly important in order to determine the meaning (and role) of populism.

¹⁶ Ifversen, 70.

¹⁷ Ifversen, 76-77.

¹⁸ Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 155-156.

of historical contexts. The primary sources I have selected for my analysis consist of speeches by key orators and politicians who have been instrumental in shaping the role and meaning of populism in the three historical periods.¹⁹

The Populist Persuasion (2017) by the American historian Michael Kazin provides an overview of American populism from the founding of the nation to Donald Trump, which I use as a work of reference throughout my analysis. *Cultural Backlash* (2019), by the American political scientists Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, is primarily an analysis of contemporary European and American populism, focusing on Brexit and Trump. However, it also provides key information about populism as a concept, which is why this book will be revisited throughout my thesis.

The analysis in the second chapter draws from secondary literature by Lawrence Goodwyn and Robert McMath, which cover the Populist Revolt in the late 19th century. *The Populist Moment* (1976) by American political scientist Lawrence Goodwyn is considered among the most important contributions to the field. *American Populism* (1992) by the American historian Robert McMath provides a more recent analysis of the period. I have chosen these books because of their academic status, and because they provide good overviews of the movement from its early years to the founding of the People's Party. A primary source used in this chapter is a preamble written by the orator and reformer Ignatius Donnelly, which was read at a conference in St. Louis in 1892. Donnelly's preamble is considered a defining document of the Populist Revolt and was later incorporated into the Omaha Platform of the People's Party. The Omaha Platform will also be examined as a primary source, as it charts out the political platform of the People's Party.²⁰

Secondary literature by Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Gerstle will figure prominently in the third chapter. *The Politics of Unreason* by S.M Lipset and Earl Raab is an important contribution to my analysis of George Wallace. Lipset is an acclaimed American political scientist, and because his book on right wing extremism is written in 1970, it offers a contemporary account of the period under analysis. "The Reach and Limits of the Liberal Consensus" by the American historian Gary Gerstle provides the historical context for analyzing how both Wallace and Nixon challenged the liberal order. The primary source analyzed in this chapter is Richard Nixon's acceptance speech of the Republican nomination

¹⁹ Additionally, because Donald Trump used Twitter routinely to reach his constituents, I analyze a selection of Twitter posts in the fourth chapter.

²⁰ Robert C. McMath, Jr, *American Populism: A Social History 1877-1898* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 161.

for president given in 1968, which provides key information about the *silent majority*.

Books by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart in addition to Michael Lind will serve as a basis for my analysis in the fourth chapter. *Cultural Backlash*, as described above, offers a contemporary examination of modern right-wing populism in the U.S and will primarily be applied to my analysis of Trumpism. *The New Class War* (2020) by the American political scientist Michael Lind provides important contextual background for my analysis of how modern right-wing populism challenged *neoliberalism*. My analysis of the Tea Party will be based on a speech given by Sarah Palin at a Tea Party convention in Tennessee in 2010. I have included her speech because Palin is considered a national spokesperson for the movement.²¹ Secondly, I analyze Donald Trump's inauguration speech from 2017 and Twitter Posts published during his presidency, which illustrate his opposition to *neoliberalism*.

Populism – A Very Short Introduction (2017) is written by the Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde and the Chilean sociologist Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, providing a precise introduction to the concept of populism. Their work will establish the theoretical basis for analyzing populism through three core concepts: *the people*, *the elite* and the *general will*. Their introduction to populism provides a clear definition of an inherently contested concept, which consequently provides a framework for my analysis of populism.

Scholars agree that all variations of populism reflect a conflict between *the people* and *the elite*, in which the former is mobilized against the latter.²² Indeed, Mark Brewer argues that the antagonistic relationship between *the people* and *the elite* is “the one element common to all American populist movements.”²³ Mudde and Kaltwasser define populism as

a thin centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.²⁴

The people is an inherently imprecise concept which adapts according to specific political contexts. Due to the ambiguity of *the people* as a category, the concept has been described as

²¹ Michael Ray, “Tea Party Movement,” Britannica, last modified December 6, 2020, accessed 10.04.21, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tea-Party-movement>

²² Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 5.

²³ Mark D. Brewer, “Populism in American Politics,” *The Forum: A Journal of Applied Research in Contemporary Politics* 14, no. 3 (2016): 251. <https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2016-0021>

²⁴ Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 6. A ‘thin-centered ideology’ is an ideology with limited morphology which combines with ‘thick-centered’, or more fully developed, ideologies, such as fascism, liberalism, and socialism. Consequently, populism latches onto more established ideologies, which in turn generates different forms of populism which advocate distinctly different policies and worldviews. See Mudde and Kaltwasser, 6-7

an ‘empty signifier’. This vagueness of the concept allows populists to appeal to people from different segments of society and unite them behind a shared cause.²⁵ According to Ernesto Laclau, the flexibility of *the people* as a signifier is what makes populism such a substantial political phenomenon.²⁶ In spite of the vagueness of the concept, *the people* is nevertheless defined by some key features.

Firstly, populism maintains that *the people* is the legitimate source of power and that the government should reflect this notion.²⁷ Indeed, populists often see federal government as an elitist institution which suppresses *the people* and undermines their sovereignty.²⁸ Secondly, *the people* refers to ‘the common people’, which is defined in stark contrast to *the elite* by socioeconomic status and shared cultural values. Populism exalts the values of ‘the common people’, who feel excluded from power structures on the basis of economic and cultural status.²⁹ Lastly, *the people* is viewed as ‘the nation’, which can be defined in terms of civic or ethnic terms, such as ‘the people of the United States’. However, defining *the people* as ‘the nation’ is problematic because states often have a complex ethnic composition. Consequently, not all citizens are necessarily seen as ‘native’, which can lead to the exclusion of certain members of society from *the people*.³⁰

The elite is a similarly vague category which allows populists to define *the elite* in broad strokes.³¹ The distinction between *the elite* and *the people* essentially comes down to morality, where the former is seen as corrupt and self-serving and the latter is seen as pure and virtuous. *The elite* refers broadly to the political, cultural, financial and media elite but is commonly treated as one uniform group.³² The elites are defined in terms of the political, economic and cultural power they hold in liberal democracies, and which they allegedly exploit in order to promote their own interests while undermining the interests of *the people*. Populists consequently question the legitimacy of established power structures and aim to restore power to *the people* where it belongs.³³ Due to the way populism elevates the issue of political legitimacy, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart have called populism “a political

²⁵ Mudde and Kaltwasser, 9.

²⁶ Ernesto Laclau cited in Mudde and Kaltwasser, 9.

²⁷ Mudde and Kaltwasser, 9-10. As Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (*Cultural Backlash: Trump Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*, e-book (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 66.) also establish, the voice of *the people* is considered the only true source of authority, while members of *the elite*, such as experts and politicians, are essentially denounced as corrupt and self-serving.

²⁸ Brewer, “Populism in American Politics,” 252.

²⁹ Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 10-11.

³⁰ Mudde and Kaltwasser, 11.

³¹ Mudde and Kaltwasser, 14.

³² Mudde and Kaltwasser, 11-13.

³³ Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash*, 66-67 and Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 12-13.

ideology of governance,”³⁴ which advocates “first-order principles about who should rule” while remaining “silent about second-order principles, concerning what should be done.”³⁵

Lastly, the *general will* essentially reflects the idea that the government should promote the interests of *the people* as opposed to ‘the will of all’. On the one hand, this can serve to empower members of society who are seen as part of *the people* and feel excluded from power. On the other hand, because the *general will* is viewed as absolute, tied to *the people* as the sovereign, it also entails that the will of individuals who are not seen as part of *the people* can be undermined.³⁶

1.3 Structure

Chapter two provides an analysis of the Populist Revolt. Here I lay out the foundations for the rest of my thesis by showing how American populism entered into politics as a grassroots phenomenon which aimed to protect the interests of rural America.³⁷ My analysis of *producerism* introduces a key concept which permeates the American populist tradition, reflecting notions of equal treatment by the government. My analysis of *capitalism* shows how the Populist Revolt reacted to the imbalances of corporate capitalism, which kept farmers suppressed politically and economically.

Chapter three brings attention to the rise of right-wing populism in the 1960s. My analysis of *liberalism* introduces the sociopolitical context of the New Deal order, which the Conservative Right attempted to repeal, with a special emphasis on George Wallace’s distinct populism of race, which exacerbated race resentment in the South. The subsequent analysis examines how Richard Nixon moderated Wallace’s ‘southern strategy’ through his appeals to the *silent majority*, which marked the beginning of the end of the New Deal order.

Chapter four analyzes the Tea Party movement through the lens of *producerism* in order to show how the Modern Right was influenced by this ideology, yet in a different manner than the farmers were in the 19th century. Lastly, the analysis of *neoliberalism* shows how the Modern Right has served an important role in challenging the neoliberal order and focalizing the needs of a depreciated middle-class, which has suffered from four decades of neoliberal policies.

The last and concluding chapter provides a comparative analysis of all three historical

³⁴ Norris and Inglehart, 68.

³⁵ Norris and Inglehart, 4.

³⁶ Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 16-18. This is most clearly the case with the interests of *the elite*, who is seen as ‘the enemy’ and whose interests are not taken into account.

³⁷ Admittedly, populism existed in the U.S before the Populist Revolt but not on the same scale and without being labeled as such.

periods. Here, I draw attention to how concepts such as *the people*, *the elite* and the *general will* have represented continuity in American populism. However, *the people* has represented different segments of society throughout history, which has caused changes to the *general will* which is being promoted and to the features of *the elite*. The concluding chapter also demonstrates how populism has embodied issues with political representation; how populism has had positive and negative effects on American democracy; and how populism has served to change the direction of American politics historically.

2. The Populist Revolt – Grassroots Activism and the People’s Party

The Populist Revolt coalesced with increased industrialization and growing inequality in late 19th century America. While laissez-faire economics had made companies like Standard Oil, Carnegie Steel and Southern Pacific Railroad incredibly wealthy and powerful, producers were pressured by lacking regulation, high levels of debt and increasing inequality.³⁸ The Populist Revolt culminated with the establishment of the People’s Party in 1892, which was primarily a coalition of farmers but nevertheless appealed to all Americans who felt excluded from the new economic order.³⁹ The movement targeted political and corporate corruption, economic inequality and challenged the political establishment, which facilitated the status quo.⁴⁰ The Populist Revolt gave birth to populism as a concept, and the movement is often considered the origin story of American populism.⁴¹

The aim of this chapter is to analyze the meaning and role of 19th century populism. I begin this chapter by establishing the broader historical context of the Populist Revolt. Next, I analyze two conceptual relatives – *capitalism* and *producerism* – in order to demonstrate how populism served to challenge a new economic order that had undermined the economic and political status of American farmers. The discussion of *producerism* illustrates how the Populist Revolt promoted a ‘moral economy’ that would ensure all Americans equal treatment in the economy. The discussion of *capitalism* demonstrates how the Populist Revolt mobilized against the power of the financial elite in an effort to restore power to *the people* – a notion which had been undermined by aspects of American capitalism. The analysis of *capitalism* also includes an examination of an interrelated concept, *monopolism*, which was used as a counter-concept to criticize the imbalances of the economic system.

The Populist Revolt primarily manifested and spread throughout the rural regions of the South, the Great Plains, and the Rocky Mountain states in the final decades of the 19th century.⁴² By the 1890s, the market economy had transformed agriculture and made farmers more financially vulnerable than before. Falling commodity prices, new market mechanisms, high transportation costs and a ruining credit system galvanized farmers into taking political

³⁸ Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, revised edition (New York: Cornell University Press, 2017), 30.

³⁹ Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 27-28.

⁴⁰ Gary B. Nash et. al, *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society*, Concise Edition, Volume 2, 8th Edition (Pearson Education, 2016), 421.

⁴¹ Juan Francisco Fuentes, “Populism: The Timeline of a Concept,” *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 15, no. 1 (2020): 52-53. doi:10.3167/choc.2020.150103

⁴² Robert C. McMath, Jr, *American Populism: A Social History 1877-1898* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 19.

action through various farmers' Alliances and eventually the People's Party.⁴³ However, the Populist Revolt did not only mobilize farmers but also laborers and other activist groups who sought political reform.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the Populist Revolt was first and foremost a rural movement, which is why our attention will be focused on the farmers.⁴⁵

The Populist Revolt was characterized by grassroots activism and is often described as a 'movement culture' because of that. In its initial phase, the movement culture was highly fragmented, represented by countless small groups of farmers who organized to advance their political aims. These farmers observed how *capitalism* was transforming the agriculture sector and how new economic trends threatened their autonomy as farmers. The Texas based Knights of Reliance, formed by John R. Allan in 1877, was one of these groups, which united local communities behind a message of anti-monopolism and *producerism*.⁴⁶

Alliances such as Knights of Reliance belonged to what McMath calls a "rural culture of protest", which emerged from closely attached communities and was brought together by solidarity and cooperation. The social bond among farmers was a cornerstone of the Populist Revolt that kept the movement together from the start.⁴⁷ A decade down the road, the protest culture had expanded into a web of farmer's alliances across the South and West. John Allan's small alliance had consolidated into the Texas Farmer's Alliance under the lead of C.W. Macune, promoting a radical agenda of anti-monopolism.⁴⁸

The American monetary system represented a fundamental problem for the farmers. The American economy was based on the gold standard at the time, which caused money contraction and high credit rates. Farmers consequently advocated the adoption of soft money, or greenbacks, as a solution to the money shortage.⁴⁹ Sweeping monetary reform based on the greenback doctrine was of key importance to the Texas Alliance, and later the People's Party, which aimed to create a more flexible economy that could provide farmers with reasonable credit.⁵⁰

The Populist Revolt culminated in Omaha, Nebraska in 1892, when the Omaha

⁴³ McMath, 10-11.

⁴⁴ Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 27-28. Organizations such as the Knights of Labor united large numbers of dissatisfied railroad and industry workers and had significant influence across the entire country. See McMath, 63-64.

⁴⁵ McMath, *American Populism*, 63-64.

⁴⁶ McMath, 7-8.

⁴⁷ McMath, 53.

⁴⁸ McMath, 78-84.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State 1877-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 109-111.

⁵⁰ Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (Oxford University Press, 1976), 84-93.

Platform was ratified and the People's Party was formally established to represent the populists' political agenda. Among their demands were currency reform based on greenbackism, with federal control of the currency, a graduate income tax, nationalization of railroads to reduce transportation costs, and more direct democracy, such as popular elections of senators and the introduction of secret ballot.⁵¹

The popularity of the People's Party in the South and the West threatened to diminish the Democratic Party, which forced Democrats to reconsider its stance on the gold issue.⁵² By the time of the 1896 presidential election, the Democratic Party had nominated the silver candidate William Jennings Bryan.⁵³ While the free coinage of silver could resolve the issue of money contraction, it was not enough to break up monopolies and resolve the credit issue.⁵⁴ At the same time, the People's Party realized it did not stand a chance to win the election and was forced to make compromises. Consequently, a Populist-Democratic coalition was assembled after the People's Party eventually adopted the silver platform and endorsed the Democratic nominee William Jennings Bryan ahead of the 1896 presidential election.⁵⁵

2.1 Producerism

The concept of *producerism* is a key feature of the protest culture which fueled the Populist Revolt. In fact, the belief in *producerism* has been considered "the most powerful organizing principle of working-class consciousness in America throughout most of the nineteenth century",⁵⁶ and as demonstrated above, *producerism* was a cornerstone of John Alan's Texas Alliance. As the following analysis aims to demonstrate, *producerism* served to consolidate *the people* in an effort to promote a 'moral economy' and restore equity to an imbalanced market economy.

Essentially, *producerism* pertains to the idea that everyone should be guaranteed the fruits of their work – a notion which was under pressure from corporate capitalism and *monopolism*. *Producerism* is a continuation of a tradition known as 'radical republicanism', which was promoted by antebellum farmers and has deep roots in American political thought all the way back to the founding of the nation. *Producerism* promotes the idea of a 'moral economy' based on equality and fairness, in which the government should maintain a level playing field and give everyone equal opportunities to labor and make a living. The opposite

⁵¹ McMath, *American Populism*, 166-167 and Nash et al., *The American People*, 421.

⁵² Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 232.

⁵³ Goodwyn, 254.

⁵⁴ Goodwyn, 234-235.

⁵⁵ Goodwyn, 233-263.

⁵⁶ McMath, *American Populism*, 53.

is an economy dominated by monopolies where certain individuals are given ‘special privileges’ at the expense of the majority. The ‘moral economy’ was advocated by Andrew Jackson and championed by antebellum farmers in the 1830s and 1840s, and perpetuated by their successors near the end of the century.⁵⁷

On February 22, 1892, farmers, laborers and reformers gathered in St. Louis to discuss the future of the People’s Party. During the meeting, the reformer Ignatius Donnelley read his preamble which came to define the People’s Party.⁵⁸ Donnelley expressed how “the fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes,”⁵⁹ which reflects the opposite of the producerist ideal of equality and fairness. Donnelley went on to express how the “the intelligent working people and producers of the United States have come together in the name of justice, order and society, to defend liberty, prosperity and justice”.⁶⁰ This passage establishes a link between *the people* and the producing class. Fundamentally, the label ‘producer’ applied to laborers and farmers, but it was also a moral and political classification which applied broadly to *any* citizen who opposed the ‘monopolists’.⁶¹ This reflects how *the people* served as an ‘empty signifier’ with the ability to frame *the people* in a way that united a great number of Americans behind a common cause, which in this case was against the monopolists and economic injustice.

By portraying the producers as defenders of “liberty, prosperity and justice”, Donnelley also associates *the people* with virtuousness, while portraying *the elite* as a corrupt group of people who have built their wealth on the hard work of others. These characteristics reflect the populist distinction between the ‘righteous people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’, which in turn serves to establish who the enemy is and why that enemy must be confronted. At the center of this division is a profound belief in what is right and what is wrong, which emerges from the populist belief in a ‘moral economy’ that treats all Americans equally and where hard work is rewarded. As Kazin argues, the producers felt contempt for the capitalist class because they “either preyed on human weakness or made a lucrative income without having to work very hard for it”.⁶² Consequently, it would be wrong to argue that the populists objected to economic inequality per se; instead, they objected to how the economy treated Americans unequally. As such, the Populist Revolt served an important function in society by

⁵⁷ McMath, 51-53.

⁵⁸ McMath, 160-161.

⁵⁹ Ignatius Donnelley cited in McMath, 161. Donnelley’s speech from St. Louis is not available through online archives.

⁶⁰ Donnelley cited in McMath, 161.

⁶¹ Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 34-35.

⁶² Kazin, 35.

renegotiating the ground rules of the American economy and what principles it should be based on, which was fair treatment and equal opportunity.

2.2 Capitalism

The analysis of *capitalism* calls attention to problematic aspects of the American economy in the late 19th century which galvanized farmers to take political action. Economic arrangements such as the gold standard, the market economy and the crop lien system undermined farmers and promoted the interests of the financial elite. My examination of *capitalism* aims to demonstrate how populism sought to reform a dysfunctional economic system that served to undermine the farmers' economic and political status.

Between the 1850s and 1890s, American farming became increasingly commercialized as the U.S economy moved in the direction of corporate capitalism. Farmers became subject to centralized economic structures they exercised little control over, which in turn reduced their independence.⁶³ Farmers had little control over the prices they received for their products, which instead were set by cotton markets far away from the farmer and his reach of influence.⁶⁴ New commodity markets with centralized cotton exchanges also included so called 'futures markets', which gave speculators the opportunity to buy the farmers' crops and wait for the right time to sell. Such mechanisms had huge economic potential for middlemen, whereas it hardly benefited the producing class. Sticking to the tradition of *producerism*, farmers maintained that the rewards should go to the producers of the crops and not market speculators.⁶⁵

Political scientist Lawrence Goodwyn identifies the 'financial question' as a key issue that contributed to the Populist Revolt. The financial question entailed disagreement over the nation's currency and how much money should be in circulation. Bankers and creditors wanted to maintain the gold standard with its intrinsic value, which was unacceptable to 'greenbackers' because it led to money contraction, which was only beneficial to bankers and creditors. Money contraction, in a nutshell, occurs when production and population increase, while the amount of money in rotation stays the same, to the effect that farmers would have to sell more to make the same amount of money. Greenbackers therefore advocated a transition to greenbacks, or soft money, which would increase the amount of money in circulation and

⁶³ William F. Holmes, "Populism: In Search of Context", *Agricultural History* 64, no. 4 (1990): 40-45
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3743349>

⁶⁴ McMath, *American Populism*, 36.

⁶⁵ McMath, 43-45.

create a more flexible economy that reflected the wealth of the country as a whole.⁶⁶

The crop lien system was another aspect of American capitalism which put considerable limitations on the farmers' autonomy. After the Civil War, the South was financially depressed, with poor capital flow and few banks to distribute more. Cashless farmers therefore turned to their merchants, forced to acquire supplies on credit.⁶⁷ The merchants would use the farmer's crop as security and supply the farmer with credit at soaring interest rates. Merchants also operated with a 'two price system', charging higher prices for goods bought on credit than with cash, which made it harder for farmers to manage their debts.⁶⁸ The credit system turned many farmers into landless tenants as the merchants took possession of their land due to missing payments.⁶⁹

These three aspects of the American economy – the new market economy, the gold standard, and the crop lien system – were strongly biased against agriculture. Corporate capitalism and the commercialization of agriculture gave farmers less control over their financials, while capitalists were allowed to make huge profits by exploiting market mechanisms. Similarly, the gold standard contracted the economy, reduced the farmer's profits and kept credit scarce, thus giving merchants a near monopoly on credit which bankrupted the farmers. Consequently, *capitalism* in the late 19th century represented an imbalanced system which failed to adequately promote the *general will of the people* while serving that of the financial elite. These injustices in the end motivated farmers into taking political action to reform the system and make it work in their favor, which is why *capitalism* is fundamental to our understanding of 19th century American populism.

Populism served a role in American society by bringing these issues to the bargaining table and by pushing for economic reform. This entailed a transition to soft money, which would mitigate the issues of money contraction and expensive credit. This is reflected in the Omaha Platform of the People's Party: "We demand a national currency, safe, sound, and flexible issued by the general government only, a full legal tender for all debts, public and private, and that without the use of banking corporations."⁷⁰

By adopting greenbackism, the People's Party consequently launched this issue into the realm of national politics, demanding that federal government take charge and

⁶⁶ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 8-13.

⁶⁷ Goodwyn, 21-25.

⁶⁸ McMath, *American Populism*, 31-32.

⁶⁹ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 21-25.

⁷⁰ The Omaha Platform, "The Omaha Platform: Launching the Populist Party", History Matters, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5361/>

democratize the economy. The fact that the Democratic Party was forced to reconsider its stance on the gold standard reflects how populism influenced the discourse on political economy and forced decision makers to pay attention to the farmers' concerns. Similarly, cooperative strategies of purchasing and marketing were employed by the farmers to make farmers independent of their merchants and diminish the crop-lien system.⁷¹ This is an example of how the Populist Revolt challenged the power of the financial elite by creating their own systems of marketing and purchasing, thus introducing new ideas of how the system could be reformed in ways that would empower the farmer.

The concept of *monopolism* is closely linked to *capitalism* and reflects how the American economy was biased towards the financial elite. *Monopolism* functions as the counter-concept of populism because it represents the opposite of what *the people* advocated, which was an egalitarian economy based on *producerism*. As demonstrated above, the economy was hardly structured after principles of equality which would give all citizens equal opportunities. The new market economy, the crop lien system and the gold standard were all mechanisms that undermined the producers and handed the financial elite an advantage.

However, the populists were not hostile to *capitalism* per se; they attempted to reform *capitalism* in a way that made the system more equitable. Furthermore, *monopolism* essentially came to represent everything that was wrong with the system, which is why *monopolism*, not *capitalism*, functioned as the counter-concept of populism. S. O. Daws, who worked as a 'travelling lecturer' at the time of the Populist Revolt, encouraged Alliance members "to stand as a great conservative body against the encroachments of monopolies".⁷² This captures the dichotomy between *the people* and *the elite*, or between the farmers and the monopolists, during the Populist Revolt. *The people* are portrayed as the defenders of fundamental American values, whereas *the elite* represents the forces that threaten to undermine those same values of equality and fairness.

On the one hand, *monopolism* was indicative of actual monopolism, such as privately owned railroad services. Because these companies controlled the lanes of commerce, they could charge unreasonable prices for a service which was imperative for the farmer's way of life.⁷³ On the other hand, *monopolism* alluded broadly to economic power. According to Kazin, the trope 'money power' was used by all "who were seeking a way to stigmatize the

⁷¹ McMath, *American Populism*, 84-85.

⁷² S. O. Daws cited in McMath, 72.

⁷³ McMath, 44-45.

unseen, faraway forces that had such influence over their lives”.⁷⁴ Such unseen, faraway forces reflect the economic shift towards corporate capitalism which alienated farmers from their businesses. McMath posits that ‘monopoly’ was the modern name for ‘special privilege’, which had been vividly used by Andrew Jackson and reformers of the antebellum period to protest economic injustice.⁷⁵ As such, *monopolism* was used as a counter-concept to target the fundamental injustice generated by an economic system that gave certain individuals so called ‘special privilege’.

Moreover, Kazin contends that ‘plutocrats’, ‘monopolists’ and the ‘money power’ were all frequently used signifiers applied to a non-productive class of wealthy capitalists whose power reached into “every household, business and seat of government”.⁷⁶

Monopolism thus not only refers to inequality in the market but also to political corruption. Donnelley’s preamble from 1892 reflects this notion vividly:

We meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin. Corruption dominates the ballot-box, the Legislatures, the Congress, and touches even the ermine of the bench ...

The fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few, unprecedented in the history of mankind ...

We charge that the controlling influences dominating both these parties have permitted the existing dreadful conditions to develop without serious effort to prevent or restrain them ...

Assembled on the anniversary of the birthday of the nation, and filled with the spirit of the grand general and chief who established our independence, we seek to restore the government of the Republic to the hands of “the plain people,” with which class it originated...⁷⁷

Donnelley’s preamble illustrates how the American political system was more responsive to the financial elite than *the people*. By maintaining the gold standard, for example, the government pursued an economic agenda with complete disregard for the *general will of the people*. The desire to return power to *the people* reflects the populist principle that *the people* is the legitimate source of power and that the government should promote their interests.

Donnelley portrays a reality where the opposite is the case, in which “corruption dominates the ballot-box” and where the capitalist class has accrued wealth at the expense of *the people*.

⁷⁴ Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 32.

⁷⁵ McMath, *American Populism*, 52.

⁷⁶ Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 31.

⁷⁷ Ignatius Donnelley, in The Omaha Platform. I here refer to the preamble written by Donnelley, which was incorporated into the Omaha Platform on July 4, 1892. Minor adjustments were made to Donnelley’s original preamble from St. Louis when it was incorporated into the Omaha Platform later that year (see McMath, *American Populism*, 167).

Consequently, populism served a role in society by promoting economic reforms but also by addressing political corruption and attempting to restore the power to *the people*. The fact that the populists were forced to create a third party to have their voices heard speaks volumes about the influence of the financial elite and the failure of the old parties to represent the American people, with whom power originates.

2.3 Conclusion

The point of this analysis has been to examine what populism represented in the 19th century and the role of populism in American society at the time. Populism in the late 19th century reflected a massive grassroots movement of producers who mobilized to reform an economic system that suppressed them and worked against their interests. The fact that the Populist Revolt emerged from various farming communities across rural America and eventually grew into a large movement represented by the People's Party makes it a uniquely democratic, bottom-up effort to promote the *general will of the people*.⁷⁸

The Populist Revolt was a democratic movement in other ways as well. Essentially, the Populist Revolt was a matter of poor representation and neglect. The transition to corporate capitalism had changed the rules of the game and provided the financial elite with an economic advantage while the farmers struggled to adjust to the new times. And as Donnelley articulated in his preamble, the old political parties had allowed this to happen. Consequently, populism served an important democratic role by elevating the concerns of the producers and broadening the political debate to encompass such issues as monetary reform. The fact that the Democratic Party adjusted its stance on the gold standard is an example of how the Populist Revolt served to bring the issues of the farmers to the forefront of the national debate.

The heritage of *producerism* was a centerpiece of the Populist Revolt which underlined its ideological aspirations of promoting a 'moral economy' based on fairness and equality. *Producerism* essentially represented the opposite of *monopolism*, which came to represent everything that was wrong about the American economy and how it was biased against the farmers. While the concept of *producerism* served to unite the producers behind a common cause, *monopolism* was used as a counter-concept to denounce 'the enemy' and call attention to the fundamental injustice inherent to the American economy. Populism was

⁷⁸ This feature arguably sets it apart from the right-wing populism of the 20th and 21st centuries, which will be analyzed in the subsequent chapters.

consequently a reactionary effort to revitalize the producerist tradition which had been neglected by the arrival of corporate capitalism.

3. The Conservative Right – Wallace and Nixon

In the 19th century, populism was linked to grassroots activism by farmers and laborers who challenged the uneven dynamics of corporate capitalism and political corruption. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the development of populism in the 20th century and demonstrate how right-wing populism served to replace the liberal order with a conservative one. Whereas 19th century populism was associated with a left-wing agenda of challenging big corporations and elevating the working-class, 20th century populism was tied to a right-wing agenda of political and cultural conservatism which suppressed vulnerable groups. Instead of targeting big corporations, right-wing populism targeted ‘big government’; and instead of targeting the rich, right-wing populism employed a producerist appeal which targeted redistribution policies and elevated the importance of self-reliance.

I begin this chapter by introducing the broader sociopolitical context of the Conservative Right. Subsequently, I analyze two conceptual relatives of populism – *liberalism* and the *silent majority* – in order to demonstrate how the Conservative Right played an important role in rebuking the liberal New Deal order. The discussion of *liberalism* will center on George Wallace and his distinct populism of race, which not only targeted civil rights legislation, but also the power of federal government. The discussion of the *silent majority* aims to show how Nixon tapped into race resentment and evoked notions of *producerism* to elevate a neglected middle-class and usher in a new way of thinking about the role of federal government. In addition to discussing the role of right-wing populism in American politics, the analysis also sheds some light on how right-wing populism was affected *by* the sociopolitical context.

The rise of the Conservative Right represents the decline of the New Deal order which had dominated American politics since Franklin D. Roosevelt took office. Policy programs introduced by New Deal liberalism were designed to counteract the economic decline and soaring unemployment rate caused by the Great Depression. The shift in national politics expanded the scope of federal government by scaling up the welfare state, tightening market regulations and stimulating the economy. The New Deal order became the new standard of federal government for about forty years, and had broad public and bipartisan support.⁷⁹

President Lyndon B. Johnson continued the New Deal order by expanding the welfare state to include more marginalized groups. When President Johnson assumed the presidency

⁷⁹ William C. Bermann, *America's Right Turn: From Nixon to Clinton*, second edition (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998). 1-3.

in 1963, the racial crisis was escalating, and the civil rights movement was pushing hard for social reform. Urban disorder and rioting became the new normal in the second half of the sixties, with deadly clashes in cities such as Los Angeles, Newark, and Detroit. The conservative Kerner Commission, instituted by President Johnson to investigate the riots, found that the riots were caused by socio economic factors and discriminatory police methods. This gave Johnson the incentive he needed to increase public spending through the initiatives of the Great Society in an effort to mitigate the racial crisis and fight poverty.⁸⁰

However, the liberal establishment faced a conservative backlash, as conservative, white middle-class voters began to question the necessity of Johnson's federal initiatives.⁸¹ In contrast to the programs of the New Deal, Johnson's Great Society mainly benefited people of color and the poor, without offering much to the average taxpayer. Many Democratic voters thus felt alienated from the party as it became increasingly associated with the civil rights movement and the struggles of African Americans. Additionally, fear of urban disorder, objection to open housing and a sense of moral collapse resulted in a white backlash which gave conservatives an opportunity to challenge the liberal establishment.⁸²

3.1 Liberalism

The New Deal order established a liberal consensus which dominated American politics for nearly four decades. Historian Gary Gerstle calls attention to the reach and limits of that consensus, arguing that while a consensus presided in respect to political economy and the scope of federal government, liberals and conservatives disagreed on the federal government's right to enforce liberal policies on the state level.⁸³ The aim of this analysis is to demonstrate how right-wing populism, reflected in the politics of George Wallace, challenged *liberalism* by exploiting race resentment and targeting federal intervention on the state level. I begin this chapter by introducing the broader sociopolitical context of *liberalism* in 20th century American politics.

The role of federal government was dramatically reshaped by the New Deal order from the 1930s and onwards. In response to the Great Depression, New Dealers built a substantial welfare state, regulated the markets, and expanded the taxation system. The

⁸⁰ Philip Jenkins, *A History of the United States*, fourth edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 242-243.

⁸¹ Gary Gerstle, "The Reach and Limits of the Liberal Consensus," In *The Liberal Consensus Reconsidered: American Politics and Society in the Postwar Era*, ed. Robert Mason and Iwan W. Morgan, e-book (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017), 77.

⁸² Bermann, *America's Right Turn*, 6-10.

⁸³ Gerstle, "The Reach and Limits," 54-55.

political climate of war and conflict from the 1940s and onwards ensured the prolongation of the New Deal order. The massive military mobilization during World War II called for big federal budgets and increased taxation of American citizens.⁸⁴ In the fifties, the Republican president Dwight D. Eisenhower pressed on with the New Deal agenda as the arrival of the Cold War maintained bipartisan support for a strong federal government and robust tax revenues. The increased influx of capital provided the federal government with the means not only to finance expensive military projects but also to invest domestically on a much larger scale than before. Importantly, these developments introduced new ideas about how federal government could respond to economic and social challenges.⁸⁵

While a bipartisan consensus on political economy and the scope of federal government had emerged, there was no consensus in regard to state autonomy and the federal government's right to impose liberal social policies locally. During the 1950s, there was an increased readiness on behalf of the federal government to enforce civil rights legislation on the state level. Historically, state autonomy had been protected by the so called 'police power', which gave states the right to regulate a range of policy issues, such as race. During the FDR era, however, the Supreme Court stepped up its efforts to curtail state autonomy and enforce the Bill of Rights on the state level through such decisions as *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ruled school segregation unconstitutional.⁸⁶

Increased tax revenues gave the federal government both the capacity and the determination to reshape politics on the state level. Importantly, it also tilted the power balance in the direction of federal government, which entailed that states were forced to toe the line on matters they fundamentally disagreed on. These altered power dynamics generated strong resistance on the state level, and the lack of consensus on social policy questions created a hostile environment in the southern states which populists like the Democrat George Wallace seized upon.⁸⁷ Wallace was Governor of Alabama between 1963-1967 and ran for president in the elections of 1964 and 1968. As a populist, Wallace was anti-liberal in respect to federal intervention and civil rights enforcement, however, he was considered a liberal in respect to political economy. Wallace's political sympathies consequently reflect the ruptures

⁸⁴ Gerstle, 55-57. The fact that Wallace was a Democrat makes it perhaps unusual to associate him with right-wing populism. However, because he advocated conservative social values which echoed right-wing politics, it is natural to associate him with right-wing populism. The problem of labeling Wallace politically is tied to the political realignment which began in the sixties as the Democratic and Republican parties adopted liberal and conservative profiles, respectively.

⁸⁵ Gerstle, 56-58.

⁸⁶ Gerstle, 59-61.

⁸⁷ Gerstle, 62-63.

within the liberal consensus, which makes him an ideal case study of the Conservative Right.

During his first campaign for governor of Alabama in 1958, Wallace ran on a platform of welfare liberalism while remaining neutral on race issues, as opposed to his contender John Patterson who was far more outspoken on racial matters.⁸⁸ Wallace lost the race, which compelled him to confront race issues more head-on during his next campaign, promising to “make race the basis of politics in this state”.⁸⁹ This time, Wallace won, and during his inaugural speech Wallace famously proclaimed, “segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever”,⁹⁰ which consolidated his position as an anti-civil rights politician. However, he retained his liberal position on economic issues by pursuing high taxes, welfare policies, and economic programs targeting the poor.⁹¹ This is an important detail to highlight because it illustrates how early right-wing populism was not targeting welfare liberalism, but social and cultural liberalism.

The shift in Wallace’s rhetoric demonstrates how the sociopolitical context in Alabama shaped populism in the early 1960s. In the prevailing anti-black environment of Alabama, Wallace’s success as a populist depended on his ability to tap into such sentiments and fully embrace populism. The political climate in the South required a politician who was willing to speak out aggressively against integration in a manner that likely would have been denounced by a more moderate, coastal audience. This shows how concepts not only shape the context but also how concepts are shaped *by* the context. Essentially, the specific circumstances in Alabama gave Wallace a green light to launch an assault against civil rights legislation, which consequently reshaped Wallace’s populist appeal and expanded what populism represented and the role it played in Alabama politics.

As governor, Wallace resisted desegregation and ramped down on demonstrations. Most notoriously, he attempted to physically block African Americans from entering the University of Alabama after the Supreme Court had ruled school segregation unconstitutional.⁹² Although unsuccessful in his attempt, it demonstrates how right-wing populism served an important role in demoting black integration in the South by protecting social and institutional racism. Lipset argues that, “by standing in the school doorway, Wallace was expressing for millions of people a frustrated defiance in the face of the tide of

⁸⁸ Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1970* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1970), 342.

⁸⁹ George Wallace cited in Lipset and Raab, *The Politics of Unreason*, 342.

⁹⁰ George Wallace cited in Lipset and Raab, 342.

⁹¹ Lipset and Raab, 342-343.

⁹² Lipset and Raab, 343.

status change which seemed about to wash over them”.⁹³ The exclusion of blacks reflects the feature of *the people* as ‘the nation’, defined in ethnic terms. By attempting to protect institutional racism, Wallace’s style of populism essentially reshaped *the people* on the basis of color, in which whites were included and blacks were excluded from the category. Consequently, the *general will* became restricted to the will of white Americans, which shows how populism in this context played an undemocratic role in American society.

Wallace, however, was cautious about addressing race explicitly, instead he turned the issue of segregation into a matter of states’ rights. Wallace attacked the power of federal government which allegedly threatened states’ rights and the liberty of Americans. By doing so, Wallace portrayed the South’s cause in a more favorable light which resonated more strongly among whites in the North.⁹⁴ During his first presidential campaign in 1964, Wallace argued that matters such as segregation should be determined on the state level. He also rejected the notion that there was a racially motivated backlash against people of color; instead, he described it as, “a backlash against the theoreticians and bureaucrats in national government who are trying to solve problems that ought to be solved at the local level”.⁹⁵

Wallace’s attempt of turning the race issue into an issue of federal tyranny reflects a key feature of populism, namely that political legitimacy rests with *the people* and not with the establishment in Washington D.C. Wallace’s anti-federalist position thus demonstrates how right-wing populism discredited federal authorities and their right to determine state policy, thus pushing back on the liberal consensus and the expansion of federal government. Concurrently, his careful navigation around the issue of race illustrates Wallace’s ability as a populist to spin convincing narratives with ulterior motives. According to Kazin, Wallace understood that the true source of his support was linked to the racial backlash against the civil rights movement and the increased crime levels widely associated with it – and not to the issue of state rights.⁹⁶ Wallace nevertheless realized that by framing the issue around federal tyranny he was able to make broader appeals and reach whites in the North.

Wallace also appealed to northern whites by calling attention to how black integration could threaten job security and suburban neighborhoods.⁹⁷ Although Wallace avoided the race issue directly, he exploited and propagated racial sentiments among whites who feared how

⁹³ Lipset and Raab, 344.

⁹⁴ Joseph E. Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right: Race and the Southern Origins of Modern Conservatism*, e-book (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 82-83.

⁹⁵ George Wallace cited in Lipset and Raab, *The Politics of Unreason*, 344.

⁹⁶ Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, revised edition (New York: Cornell University Press, 2017), 233.

⁹⁷ Lowndes, *From the New Deal*, 85.

black integration could affect their lives. As Joseph Lowndes argues, Wallace's rhetoric "forged a new sense of us and them", where new identities emerged in strong opposition to one another, and where his supporters were largely portrayed as the victims of black integration.⁹⁸ Right-wing populism thus not only exacerbated racial sentiments; it also propagated a narrative of a white working class increasingly under pressure from a liberal legislative agenda.

During his presidential campaign in 1968, Wallace called attention to the escalating urban disorder for which he blamed the liberal, permissive policies of the Johnson administration.⁹⁹ Over the past few decades, federal government had demonstrated its ability to govern competently in times of crisis, but that image was now being contested. In a speech, criticizing President Johnson, Wallace claimed that American cities were crumbling "because you let them burn them down, that's the reason they burned them down".¹⁰⁰ Such populist attacks on the Johnson administration helped reshape the public's perception of the federal government as well as what the right course of action was to mitigate the urban crisis. Whereas Eisenhower and Johnson viewed the urban crisis in relation to socioeconomic challenges, Wallace introduced a conservative and authoritarian discourse of 'law and order', proclaiming that "we gonna have a police state for folk who burn the cities down", while branding demonstrators as the "scum of the earth".¹⁰¹

Such rhetoric demonstrates how right-wing populism portrayed rioters as outlaws who had to be controlled, while glossing over the deep-seated issues of poor housing, lack of opportunity and poverty. It is evident that the Johnson administration did not simply fail to address the issue of urban disorder as Wallace maintained; Johnson rather had different ideas on how to solve the social challenges. Wallace nevertheless promoted a populist agenda by portraying the Johnson administration as permissive and incompetent. Consequently, as the concept of *liberalism* had introduced a new outlook on the role and capacity of federal government, right-wing populism helped change the political discourse by bringing into question the legitimacy of federal intervention and the effectiveness of liberal policies.

3.2 The Silent Majority

The *silent majority* represented middle-class, predominantly white voters who felt sidelined by the liberal agenda and who paid their taxes, abided by the law and were tired of civil

⁹⁸ Lowndes, 88.

⁹⁹ Lowndes, 94.

¹⁰⁰ George Wallace cited in Lowndes, 94.

¹⁰¹ George Wallace cited in Lipset and Raab, *The Politics of Unreason*, 356.

unrest. The point of this analysis is to show how Richard Nixon reached out to the *silent majority*, in a way that exploited the race issue and evoked producerist sentiments, in order to forge a conservative bloc strong enough to defeat the Democrats. Although Nixon in some respects governed like a liberal, he spoke like a conservative, which helped reshape the political discourse and marked the beginning of the end of the New Deal order.

Wallace's 'southern strategy' had demonstrated the political force of race and its appeal among white voters. However, Nixon supported civil rights legislation and adopted a subtle position on race which allowed him to reach out to moderates as well. As Dan Carter argues, "Nixon realized he couldn't be *too* moderate", because southerners would never vote for a liberal like Johnson anyway, and Nixon's Republican contenders were simply too conservative for the average voter.¹⁰² Whereas the context of Alabama had pushed populism in a more aggressive direction on race, Nixon's attempt to appeal to moderate voters forced him to tone down the racial rhetoric. The national context consequently shaped Nixon's brand of right-wing populism into a more moderate concept, as compared to Wallace.

Although Nixon assumed a moderate position on race, he nevertheless exploited the race issue stealthily in his appeal to the *silent majority*. In his acceptance speech for the Republican nomination, he addressed the condition of American cities ("we see cities enveloped in smoke and flame"), and looked to the *silent majority* for salvation:

It is another voice, it is a quiet voice in the tumult of the shouting. It is the voice of the great majority of Americans, the forgotten Americans, the non shouters, the non demonstrators. They're not racists or sick; they're not guilty of the crime that plagues the land; they are black, they are white; they're native born and foreign born; they're young and they're old. They work in American factories, they run American businesses. They serve in government; they provide most of the soldiers who die to keep it free. They give drive to the spirit of America. They give lift to the American dream. They give steel to the backbone of America. They're good people. They're decent people; they work and they save and they pay their taxes and they care.¹⁰³

Nixon's appeal to the *silent majority* is undeniably very broad and seeks to transcend race and include Americans from different social and economic strata. However, *producerism* constitutes the foundations of Nixon's appeal to the *silent majority*. They are model citizens,

¹⁰² Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, The Origins of the New Conservatism, And the Transformation of American Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 326-328.

¹⁰³ Richard Nixon, *Acceptance of the Republican Nomination for President*, August 8, 1968, <https://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/speeches/rhetoric/rmnaccep.htm>

the backbone of America, who work, save and pay their taxes, and abide by the law. Furthermore, they are ‘the forgotten Americans’, who feel neglected by the liberal agenda which had prioritized disadvantaged Americans. By emphasizing the notion of *producerism*, Nixon consequently frames *the people* as the producers – the contributors – which shifts the spotlight from the disadvantaged to the middle-class. Indeed, the GOP used ‘middle America’ as a trope to identify middle-class Americans positioned in-between *the elite* and welfare recipients.¹⁰⁴ Consequently, whereas Wallace excluded blacks from the concept of *the people*, Nixon excluded the non-producers from *the people*. Moreover, the non-producers (the shouters and the demonstrators) are not only excluded; they are indeed pitted against *the people*. In fact, the absence of an anti-elitist appeal in Nixon’s speech is striking, which suggests that right-wing populism was less about targeting those ‘above’ the middle-class and more about targeting those ‘below’ for disturbing the peace.

Nixon’s appeal to the *silent majority* is principally forged around a moral imperative to work, to serve and to abide. The subtext of Nixon’s speech, and the message that goes out to the ‘shouters’ and the ‘demonstrators’, is that America faces a moral problem, for which the remedy is to apply yourself and take personal responsibility. Indeed, Jefferson Cowie argues that Nixon framed the producers less in terms of economic interests and more in terms of their moral resolve as the country’s backbone. Furthermore, and crucially, Nixon offered no policy initiatives which could have strengthened the position of the working class; instead, Nixon’s appeal simply depended on recognizing the producers’ virtuous efforts.¹⁰⁵ As Kazin points out, Nixon “talked like a grassroots conservative while often governing like a liberal”, referring to how he pursued affirmative action and guaranteed annual income as an alternative to welfare.¹⁰⁶

Nixon offered a conservative solution to the urban crisis which sharply contrasted the philosophy of the Great Society. Principally, Nixon’s solution was tied to law and order. In his acceptance speech, Nixon promised “to launch a war against organized crime in this country”, pledging to “open a new front against the filth peddlers and the narcotics peddlers who are corrupting the lives of the children of this country.”¹⁰⁷ Although he momentarily after confronted accusations of law and order being a “code word for racism”, it is not contentious to assume that a war on crime would disproportionately affect the African American

¹⁰⁴ Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 253.

¹⁰⁵ Jefferson Cowie, “Nixon’s Class Struggle: Romancing the New Right Worker, 1969–1973,” *Labor History* 43, no. 3 (2002): 258. doi:10.1080/0023656022000001779.

¹⁰⁶ Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 251.

¹⁰⁷ Nixon, *Acceptance speech*.

community. And this is where Nixon arguably exploited the race issue without explicitly doing so.

Lowndes argues that the *silent majority* was principally forged around the ‘social question’, which pertains to the civil rights movement and the escalating urban disorder. Lowndes contends that Nixon “used the politics of racial resentment” to steer Democratic voters in the direction of the Republicans.¹⁰⁸ He further argues that Nixon’s cross-sectional coalition of white voters was “defined less in terms of class than opposition to continued civil rights reform”.¹⁰⁹ As such, Nixon – although in a more convoluted way than Wallace – helped shape populism into a concept that represented race resentment and demotion of people of color.

However, we should be careful about weighing the race aspect too heavily. Jefferson Cowie maintains that feelings of neglect were more important than race as a force behind the *silent majority*. He argues that blue collar workers felt that their needs had been muted by such issues as civil rights, war, and the counterculture.¹¹⁰ Additionally, the economic programs of the Great Society had benefited the disadvantaged – not the middle class. ‘Middle America’, those trapped between rich and poor, felt cast aside, unrepresented, and unable to protect and advance their social status, thus opening the door for right-wing populism.¹¹¹ Nixon’s campaign, however, was hardly an attempt to roll back the welfare state, as Nixon and the GOP relied on the support of blue-collar workers, whose middle-class status was the product of New Deal programs which they still benefited from.¹¹²

I have suggested that Nixon in some respects continued the liberal economic agenda of the past. It is nevertheless clear from Nixon’s acceptance speech that the tide on political economy had turned:

For the past five years we have been deluged by government programs for the unemployed; programs for the cities; programs for the poor. And we have reaped from these programs an ugly harvest of frustration, violence and failure across the land ...

America is a great nation today not because of what government did for people – but because of what people did for themselves over a hundred-ninety years in this country ...

Instead of government jobs, and government housing, and government welfare, let government use its tax and credit policies to enlist in this battle the greatest engine of progress

¹⁰⁸ Joseph Lowndes, “White Populism and the Transformation of the Silent Majority,” *The Forum* 14, no. 1 (2016): 26. <https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2016-0004>

¹⁰⁹ Lowndes, “White Populism,” 30.

¹¹⁰ Cowie, “Nixon’s Class Struggle,” 261.

¹¹¹ Cowie, 261.

¹¹² Lowndes, “White Populism,” 30 and Cowie, “Nixon’s Class Struggle,” 260.

ever developed in the history of man – American private enterprise ...

Black Americans, no more than white Americans, they do not want more government programs which perpetuate dependency...

I pledge to you tonight that we shall have new programs which will provide that equal chance.¹¹³

It is evident that Nixon's rhetoric represents a departure from the liberal vision of previous administrations and a move towards limited government. First of all, Nixon, similar to Wallace, blames the Johnson administration for the collapse of American cities, suggesting that the government programs have only led to violence and decay, thus sustaining the attack on *liberalism* and questioning the effectiveness of these programs. Nixon instead promotes a conservative message of self-reliance and hard work, arguing that America was built by the people and not the government, thus suggesting that 'American enterprise', and not the government, is the solution to America's problems. Instead, the government should use its resources to create more jobs so that Americans can help themselves, as opposed to becoming dependent on welfare. That last sentence resonates with the tradition of *producerism*, as Nixon pledges to ensure equality in the market (by providing opportunities) and give everyone 'that equal chance' to succeed.

Even though Nixon in reality may have maintained the status quo on such issues as political economy and the social question, the producerist appeal of self-reliance changed the political discourse and ushered in a new era in American politics. Neoconservatives ramped up their efforts to target the Great Society and affirmative action programs, which helped secure Ronald Reagan's victory in 1980. These voices claimed that the government was not apt to deal with the great challenge of poverty and maintained that welfare programs corroded the principle of equality of opportunity by introducing equality of condition – notions that greatly contrasted the New Dealers and their faith in federal government.¹¹⁴ With Reagan, American politics also rebuked the New Deal standard of high taxes which cut spending for many economic programs.¹¹⁵ Consequently, the new discourse ushered in by the *silent majority* coalition is perhaps the single most important consequence of right-wing populism in the 1960s, which in the nineties forced even Democrats to abandon much of the liberal heritage of the New Deal order in order to stay relevant for white working-class constituents.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Nixon, *Acceptance speech*.

¹¹⁴ Bermann, *America's Right Turn*, 64-65.

¹¹⁵ Bermann, 92.

¹¹⁶ Lowndes, "White Populism," 31.

3.3 Conclusion

New Deal liberalism reshaped the role of federal government and introduced a new political order based on economic and social liberalism. The New Deal order was successful and popular because it improved the conditions of the great masses – it served *the people*, so to speak. However, the New Deal order started to disintegrate when it became too skewed towards disadvantaged groups and failed to pay attention to the middle-class. The Conservative Right devised *the people* as white, middle-class Americans in an attempt to recalibrate national politics and make it more responsive to average Americans who felt increasingly neglected.

The race aspect reflects how right-wing populism was heavily characterized by cultural issues, and arguably less in terms of political economy which had been the case 80 years earlier. But at the same time, right-wing populism also represented a shift towards limited government and an increased focus on self-reliance. Although race was a significant political force in the sixties and an important aspect of right-wing populism, the political mainstream did not support continued segregation the way Wallace did. Consequently, as populism entered national politics, a moderate approach was the only viable option. By crafting the *silent majority*, Nixon skillfully reaped the benefits of racial resentment without explicitly doing so.

The *silent majority* shaped populism into a concept with a strong moral and producerist appeal, which elevated notions of self-reliance and hard work. And although Nixon in some ways continued liberal economic policies, he nevertheless represented a break with the liberal faith in economic programs and big government. As a conservative, Nixon promoted the idea of limited government and more personal responsibility, which opened the door for more dramatic policy shifts under Ronald Reagan. Right-wing populism arguably started as a response to desegregation in the deep South, but evolved into a broader conservative message of self-reliance and limited government which terminated the dominance of *liberalism* in national politics, which illustrates how populism changed in the 1960s.

4. The Modern Right – The Tea Party Movement and Trumpism

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how George Wallace and Richard Nixon tapped into racial sentiments in order to forge a conservative coalition against *liberalism* and the New Deal order – this chapter aims to show how modern right-wing populism challenged a neoliberal order. 20th century populism was characterized by race resentment but also by opposition to ‘big government’ and costly government programs. My analysis in this chapter suggests that the Modern Right has a clearer anti-elitist stain and is less characterized by the issue of race, as compared to the Conservative Right. In terms of similarities, however, 21st century right-wing populism also advocates limited government and has a strong middle-class composition which seeks to protect its status. But whereas the Populist Revolt targeted the rich, and the Conservative Right targeted the disadvantaged, the Modern Right assaults both those below and above the middle-class.

The analysis of the Modern Right will be based on two conceptual relatives: *producerism* and *neoliberalism*. I examine the Tea Party movement through the lens of *producerism* to show how Tea Partiers promoted a ‘moral economy’ based on fair treatment by the government. Although race – and immigration – was an important part of Trump’s appeal, I focus on aspects of political economy which serve to distinguish the Modern Right from the Conservative Right. By examining *neoliberalism*, I aim to demonstrate how right-wing populism challenged a neoliberal economic agenda which has suppressed the middle class for about four decades. I begin by establishing the broader sociopolitical context of the Modern Right.

The white backlash in the second half of the 20th century has been referred to as ‘the silent revolution’. In the previous chapter, I emphasized the link between right-wing populism and race, but the white backlash was also prompted by a broader intergenerational shift from materialist to post materialist values. The post war era, characterized by increased prosperity and individual security, made younger generations adopt post-materialist values of individual freedom and social liberalism over materialist values such as economic and personal security. Consequently, many Americans became concerned with such issues as gender equality, sexual liberation, human rights and protection of minorities, immigrants, and homosexuals.¹¹⁷

The cultural shift and turn towards post-materialistic values greatly divided the American electorate and the political parties on cultural matters. The Democratic Party

¹¹⁷ Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*, e-book (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 32-33.

became increasingly socially liberal, attracting younger and educated voters, while the Republican Party adopted a more socially conservative profile which appealed to older generations. Inglehart and Norris view Trump's victory as a culmination of the cultural transformation which had begun decades earlier, arguing that the President mobilized older generations of white and non-educated men who felt threatened by liberal social values.¹¹⁸

The political realignment which followed from the white backlash also replaced the New Deal order with a new bipartisan, neoliberal coalition. Michael Lind explains how the top-down neoliberal revolution which began in the 1960s, replaced democratic pluralism with a technocratic, neoliberal form of governance. *Neoliberalism* combined the free market liberalism of the right with the social liberalism of the left, and the new policy agenda served to benefit a small overclass at the expense of working-class majorities.¹¹⁹ Indeed, historian Tithi Bhattacharya argues that the rise of Trumpism can be attributed to the rising social inequalities produced by neoliberal policies and declining real incomes.¹²⁰

The context which gave rise to the Modern Right is consequently linked to cultural changes which began more than four decades earlier but also to a new political establishment which arose in its wake, and which transformed politics in Washington D.C and greatly weakened the working class economically. The rise of Trump was, however, also linked to more recent events, such as Sarah Palin's mobilization against the political establishment in 2008, and the conservative Tea Party movement which emerged after the election of President Barack Obama.¹²¹

4.1 Producerism

The Tea Party was established in 2009 and advocated tax reduction and limited government in response to President Obama's bailout policies and handling of the great recession in 2008. The movement quickly gained a strong foothold in national politics by endorsing Tea Party members for Congress, thus pushing the Republican Party in a more conservative direction.¹²² The subsequent analysis emphasizes *producerism* as an overlooked aspect of Tea Party grassroots activism which opposes special privileges and promotes a 'moral economy' based

¹¹⁸ Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash*, 331-332.

¹¹⁹ Michael Lind, *The New Class War: Saving Democracy from the Metropolitan Elite* (London: Atlantic Books, 2020), 47-48.

¹²⁰ Tithi Bhattacharya, "Donald Trump: The Unanticipated Apotheosis of Neoliberalism," *Cultural Dynamics* 29, no. 1-2 (2017): 111. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0921374017709240>

¹²¹ Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash*, 333.

¹²² Kevin Arceneaux and Stephen P. Nicholson, "Who Wants to Have a Tea Party? The Who, What, and Why of the Tea Party Movement," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 45, no. 4 (2012): 700. doi:10.1017/S1049096512000741

on equal treatment. Consequently, we return to a concept which has surfaced both in my discussion of the Populist Revolt and the Conservative Right and which permeates the American populist tradition, namely *producerism*.

In an influential paper on the Tea Party movement, Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin demonstrate how the haphazard organization of the movement has generated different Tea Party factions associated with the business sector on the one hand and grassroots activism on the other. Big business interests have been represented by such organizations as the Heritage Foundation and capitalists like the Koch brothers, promoting deregulation, limited government, and social entitlements reform.¹²³ While grassroots activists share similar conservative views on the economy, they are supportive of public spending as long as it is based on certain criteria.¹²⁴

The big business Tea Party segment principally opposes public spending on social entitlements and advocates privatization of such services.¹²⁵ As a contrast, grassroots Tea Party members are often beneficiaries of such programs as Medicare and Social Security and therefore support it. However, Tea Partiers differentiate between working Americans who pay their taxes and have earned the right to benefit from such programs, and non-workers who are undeserving recipients of government aid. Williamson and her colleagues find that “immigration and border security” was ranked as one of the most important political concerns among Tea Party supporters, which is linked to concerns about illegal immigrants receiving unwarranted government support.¹²⁶ Hostility towards immigration puts grassroots Tea Partiers at odds with elite Tea Partiers, who benefit from an influx of cheap labor.¹²⁷ Consequently, this casts grassroots Tea Party activism in opposition to *neoliberalism*, which resonates with Donald Trump’s anti-establishment rhetoric examined later on.

Many Tea Partiers have maintained that Obama strategized to give illegal immigrants amnesty in order to attract new voters. This reflects an important concern among Tea Party supporters, which is that the government does not adequately reflect the interests of average Americans.¹²⁸ Concerns about political representation reflect how the *silent majority* felt neglected by their elected officials, who were criticized for paying too much attention to the

¹²³ Vanessa Williamson, Theda Skocpol, and John Coggin, “The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism,” *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 1 (2011): 28-29. doi:10.1017/S153759271000407X

¹²⁴ Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin, “The Tea Party,” 32.

¹²⁵ Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin, 33.

¹²⁶ Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin, 32-33.

¹²⁷ Charles Post, “The Roots of Trumpism”, *Cultural Dynamics* 29, no. 1–2 (2017): 101.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0921374017709229>

¹²⁸ Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin, “The Tea Party,” 33-34.

grievances of minorities. In fact, Tea Partiers espouse similar opposition to such minority-targeted programs as affirmative action, which they see as unfair government aid to selected individuals.¹²⁹ Importantly, however, Kevin Arceneaux and Stephen Nicholson do not find compelling evidence that this is linked to racial resentment, which suggests that opposition to affirmative action predominantly arises from principles of fairness.¹³⁰ This ties in with the American creed of *producerism*, which champions equal treatment and deservedness, as demonstrated in previous chapters.

Sarah Palin, who was John McCain's running mate for the Republican ticket in 2008, has been a staunch supporter of the Tea Party cause. At a Tea Party convention in Tennessee in 2010, Palin delivered a speech with a strong producerist appeal:

The soul of this movement is the people – everyday Americans who grow our food and run our small businesses, teach our kids, and fight our wars. They're folks in small towns and cities across this great nation who saw what was happening – and they saw and were concerned, and they got involved.¹³¹

Palin here appeals to 'middle America' in a similar fashion as Richard Nixon did during his campaigns for president. Her words go out to average American citizens who work hard and dutifully, and who live in small towns and not the metropolitan coastal hubs, which Lind asserts are associated with the establishment.¹³² It is also important to take note of how Palin defines *the people* in terms of 'middle America'. We know, however, that Tea Party members are predominantly "white, male, and conservative in character" and primarily belong to the upper-middle class.¹³³ Palin nevertheless attempts to establish the Tea Party as a movement of producers, which is a broader and more elusive category.

This is yet another example of how American populism seeks to associate *the people* with the producers, while excluding other population groups. Attempts to exclude non-contributors from social entitlement programs similarly restrict the category of *the people* to producers only. This is problematic because populism views *the people* as the legitimate source of power, and any attempt to contract that category to a certain segment of society inevitably represents a democratic problem. Palin ends her speech on the following note:

¹²⁹ Arceneaux and Nicholson, "Who Wants to Have a Tea Party?" 704-705.

¹³⁰ Arceneaux and Nicholson, 708.

¹³¹ Sarah Palin, "Keynote Speech at the Inaugural Tea Party Convention," *American Rhetoric*, February 6, 2010, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/sarahpalin2010teapartykeynote.htm>

¹³² Lind, *The New Class War*, 15.

¹³³ Arceneaux and Nicholson, "Who Wants to Have a Tea Party?" 708.

So from the bottom of my heart and speaking on behalf of millions and millions and millions of Americans who want to encourage this movement, this movement is about the people. Who can argue a movement that is about the people and for the people? Remember, all political power is inherent in the people, and government is supposed to be working for the people. That is what this movement is about.¹³⁴

Combined with the feature of the *general will*, which reflects the will of *the people*, populism necessarily serves to champion the will of the producers while failing to include others who for some reason are not in a position to contribute in an equal manner. Although Palin makes no direct reference to non-contributors, the absence of vulnerable groups in her references to *the people* on some level restricts that category to workers, who are in turn projected as the legitimate source of power.

Animosity towards bank-bailouts reflects similar producerist sentiments, although in this case targeting *the elite* and not the poor. This also places Tea Party activism more sternly within the populist tradition, reflecting the dichotomy between *the people* and *the elite* clearly. As Charles Post asserts, grassroots Tea Party supporters protested against “corporate welfare,”¹³⁵ which indicates that Tea Partiers do not discriminate between handouts to rich people who have failed to protect their businesses or handouts to poor people who reap the benefits of the system without contributing – they are equally undeserving.

Palin denounces the political and financial establishment in her speech, thus expressing political sympathies which resonate among grassroots Tea Partiers. While she avoids issues of immigration and concerns about welfare freeloading, her speech is loaded with anti-elite rhetoric targeting unfair stimulus checks aimed at the business sector in the wake of the financial crisis:

Today, in the words of Congressman Paul Ryan, the 700 billion dollar “TARP has morphed into crony capitalism at its worse.” And it’s becoming a “slush fund” for the Treasury Department’s favorite big players, just as we had been warned about. And while people on Main Street look for jobs, people on Wall Street – they’re collecting billions and billions in your bailout bonuses.¹³⁶

As Cas Mudde points out, scholars have been divided on whether the Tea Party is chiefly an AstroTurf supported by big business or in fact a grassroots initiative.¹³⁷ Palin’s rhetoric

¹³⁴ Palin, “Keynote Speech”

¹³⁵ Post, “The Roots of Trumpism,” 101.

¹³⁶ Palin, “Keynote Speech”

¹³⁷ Cas Mudde, *The Far Right in America* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 23.

clearly points to elements of the movement which espouse animosity towards Wall Street and ‘big business’. In fact, Palin assaults the stimulus bill TARP, introduced by George W. Bush in 2008 to mitigate the financial crisis, as an unfair political initiative which favors ‘big players’ of the economic overclass. The reference to ‘crony capitalism’ similarly reflects concerns about a neoliberal establishment which favors their own; this breaks with the tradition of *producerism* which promotes a ‘moral economy’ based on principles of equal treatment. Palin clearly promotes this tradition at a later point: “Our government needs to adopt a pro-market agenda that doesn’t pick winners and losers, but it invites competition and it levels the playing field for everyone ... They should support competition, support innovation, reward hard work.”¹³⁸

I view the Tea Party movement as a people’s movement which advocates fairness and equal treatment regardless of financial position. The attack on the financial elite establishes Tea Party activism clearly within the populist tradition, reflecting the conflict between *the people* and *the elite* and the government’s failure to represent the former. Animosity towards illegal immigrants and welfare programs that benefit non-contributors places the Tea Party movement within the tradition of right-wing populism, reflecting sentiments which galvanized the *silent majority*, too. *Producerism* played a significant role by promoting a ‘moral economy’, which according to grassroots Tea Partiers must be based on such principles as hard work and deservedness and not handouts to those who fail to take personal responsibility – reflecting a continuation of Nixon’s message of self-reliance.

4.2 Neoliberalism

The neoliberal revolution ties in with the decline of the New Deal order explored in the previous chapter. As the New Deal order disintegrated, a bipartisan, neoliberal coalition came into place and shifted the power balance in the direction of the political, cultural, and financial overclass. The neoliberal agenda, however, was not congruent with working class interests. As outlined by Lind,

“The center of gravity of the overclass is center-right (promarket) on economic issues and center-left (antitraditional) on social issues. In comparison, the center of gravity of the much larger working class is center-left on economic issues and center-right on social issues”¹³⁹

I aim to demonstrate how the election of Donald Trump came to represent an economic class conflict, and as such, how Trump’s branch of populism served to challenge the neoliberal

¹³⁸ Palin, “Keynote Speech”

¹³⁹ Lind, *The New Class War*, 73.

economic agenda by mobilizing working-class voters who had suffered under its influence. *Neoliberalism* is treated as the counter-concept of Trump's branch of populism and as the primary target of his rhetoric in the primary sources I analyze.

As mentioned above, Lind sees the neoliberal revolution as an elitist repudiation of what he calls democratic pluralism.¹⁴⁰ According to Lind, the New Deal model led to power being dispensed more equally between different factions of American society, for example by including previously marginalized individuals "into the national power structure" and increasing the bargaining power of the working class.¹⁴¹ In essence, the overclass was kept in check by new institutional and political arrangements, which empowered other groups of society.

However, from the 1970s, the neoliberal overclass began pushing a libertarian economic agenda based on free-market principles and deregulation, which stifled the working class and its trade unions and empowered the elites.¹⁴² This has been referred to as the neoliberal 'counter-revolution', which opposed the tightly regulated, federally orchestrated post-war model.¹⁴³ Libertarians argued that market regulation, wage setting and trade unions suppressed the economy; and the economic crisis of the 1970s represented a window of opportunity for libertarians to push for economic reform. This gave rise to what Lind calls the 'managerial overclass', which came to exercise increasing control in such domains as policy making, finance, academia, foundations and the media.¹⁴⁴

Important economic changes brought about by the neoliberal order are related to global arbitrage, which Lind describes as "the strategy of taking advantage of differences in wages, regulations, or taxes among different political jurisdictions in the world or among states or provinces in a federal nation-state".¹⁴⁵ Labor arbitrage, where companies outsource their production to low-wage countries, has had detrimental effects on the US work-force as factories have been shut down and relocated elsewhere in the world. Similarly, a massive influx of Chinese products to the US market has caused the loss of more than 2 million jobs between 1999 and 2011.¹⁴⁶

Political scientist Nancy Fraser contends that the bipartisan, neoliberal mission to

¹⁴⁰ Democratic pluralism in this case refers to the New Deal order.

¹⁴¹ Lind, *The New Class War*, 44-45.

¹⁴² Lind, 47-51.

¹⁴³ Rajesh Venugopal, "Neoliberalism as concept," *Economy and Society* 44, no 2 (2015): 173. doi: 10.1080/03085147.2015.1013356

¹⁴⁴ Lind, *The New Class War*, 47-51.

¹⁴⁵ Lind, 52.

¹⁴⁶ Lind, 55-57.

liberalize and globalize the economy served to “hollow out working-class and middle-class living standards”.¹⁴⁷ Consequently, a huge segment of the American electorate felt neglected and unrepresented by the neoliberal bloc, which created an opportunity for populists like Trump to galvanize disenchanted voters and take on the Washington establishment.¹⁴⁸ Opposition to the establishment is a core feature of Trump’s inaugural address which is introduced right from the beginning:

Today's ceremony, however, has very special meaning, because today we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another, or from one party to another, but we are transferring power from Washington, D.C., and giving it back to you, the people.¹⁴⁹

This excerpt draws from the populist tradition by introducing the conflict between *the elite* and *the people*, which centers on *the elite’s* failure to execute the *general will of the people*. Similarly, Trump acknowledges (on a rhetorical level) *the people* as the legitimate source of power; a notion which is reinforced moments later, when Trump asserts how “January 20th, 2017 will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again. The forgotten men and women of our country, will be forgotten no longer”.¹⁵⁰ Notions of neglect resonate with Fraser’s argument of how the neoliberal establishment has produced a gap of forgotten voters who are demanding political representation, while also reflecting Nixon’s appeal to ‘forgotten Americans’, who felt neglected by the liberal establishment.

Trump’s speech promotes the belief that *the elite* is serving themselves at *the people’s* expense:

For too long, a small group in our nation's capital has reaped the rewards of government, while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished, but the people did not share in its wealth. Politicians prospered, but the jobs left and the factories closed. The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country.¹⁵¹

Trump’s message reflects long-term economic developments and increasing social inequality. As the economy has become more knowledge-based and internationalized, educated Americans in the metropolitan areas have prospered, while the American heartland has

¹⁴⁷ Nancy Fraser, “From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump – and Beyond,” *American Affairs* 1, no. 4 (2017): no paging. <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2017/11/progressive-neoliberalism-trump-beyond/>

¹⁴⁸ Fraser, *From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump*.

¹⁴⁹ Donald Trump, “Full text: 2017 Donald Trump inauguration speech transcript,” *Politico*, January 20, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/01/full-text-donald-trump-inauguration-speech-transcript-233907>

¹⁵⁰ Trump, Inauguration speech.

¹⁵¹ Trump, Inauguration speech.

suffered from deindustrialization and increasing unemployment.¹⁵² Indeed, this passage suggests that the Modern Right is not only about ‘leveling the playing field’ and creating a more ‘equal economy’, but also about reducing economic inequality more generally. This would make sense as the wealth gap between poor and rich families in the U.S has more than doubled between 1989 and 2016.¹⁵³ The rhetoric Trump applies suggests a change in the concept of populism, in which economic inequality, as opposed to inequality in the economy, is a bigger concern than what has been the case historically. And although Trump does not promote redistribution of wealth, the semantic shift indicates how 21st century right-wing populism expresses deep concerns with the financial conditions of the middle-class, which sets it apart from 20th century right-wing populism.

Trump returns to the issue of deindustrialization several times during his speech, addressing the consequences of global arbitrage strategies: “One by one, the factories shuttered and left our shores, with not even a thought about the millions and millions of American workers that were left behind”.¹⁵⁴ Trump then makes a promise to rejuvenate the American economy, shortly after:

“Every decision on trade, on taxes, on immigration, on foreign affairs will be made to benefit American workers and American families. We must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies and destroying our jobs.”¹⁵⁵

This is an expression of Trump’s ‘America first’ strategy, which proposes a roll back of global arbitrage models such as the outsourcing of jobs and import of cheap foreign products. As Trump says in his speech, his strategy is based on “two simple rules: buy American and hire American”.¹⁵⁶ These policies evidently reflect the *general will of the people*, who in the context of Trump is defined at least partly in terms of blue-collar workers whose jobs have been sacrificed and outsourced in order to increase corporate profits. The determination to bring jobs back to America has an anti-elitist sting and represents a desire to elevate the depreciated condition of *the people*; this reinforces the idea that right-wing populism in the 21st century expresses deep concerns with the financial conditions of the working class.

¹⁵² William A. Galston, “The Populist Moment,” *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 2 (2017): 25-28. doi: dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2017.0021

¹⁵³ Juliana M. Horowitz, Ruth Igielnik and Rakesh Kockhar, “Trends in income and wealth inequality,” Pew Research Center, January 9, 2020, accessed May 8, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/01/09/trends-in-income-and-wealth-inequality/>

¹⁵⁴ Trump, Inauguration speech.

¹⁵⁵ Trump, Inauguration speech.

¹⁵⁶ Trump, Inauguration speech. Tellingly, Trump enjoyed significant popularity in industrial areas such as Appalachia and the Rust Belt, which had experienced a collapse in manufacturing due to international competition. See Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash*, 351.

Trump has been particularly hostile towards multilateral trade agreements. During the 2020 presidential campaign, Trump used Twitter to attack his opponent Joe Biden for having promoted a neoliberal economic agenda over the course of his career:

Joe Biden is a globalist who spent 47 years outsourcing your jobs, opening your borders, and sacrificing American blood and treasure in endless foreign wars. He shuttered your steel mills, annihilated your coal jobs, and supported every disastrous trade deal for half a century...¹⁵⁷

...He was a cheerleader for NAFTA and China's entry into the WTO. Pennsylvania lost half of its manufacturing jobs after those Biden Calamities. Joe Biden is a corrupt politician who SOLD OUT Pennsylvania to CHINA!¹⁵⁸

Joe Biden's association with the Washington establishment makes him an easy target for Trump's onslaught against international trade and globalization. Furthermore, there is some validity to Trump's statements. His attacks on WTO and NAFTA represent attacks on regulatory arbitrage, executed by neoliberal administrations, which have reduced tariff barriers and exposed American industry to competition from foreign markets.¹⁵⁹ In fact, Fraser emphasizes how both NAFTA and China's entry into the WTO have had detrimental impacts on the manufacturing industry in Rust Belt states and other industry areas.¹⁶⁰ However scandalous Trump's corruption accusations against Biden may be considered, they are nevertheless saturated by the fact that such trade agreements have principally served the overclass, and not *the people*.¹⁶¹

Interestingly, Trump has not used the word 'neoliberal' *once* on Twitter; instead, he employs the word 'liberal' to denounce his opposition:

I am not just running against Biden, I am running against the Corrupt Media, the Big Tech Giants, and the Washington Swamp. It is time to send a message to these wealthy liberal hypocrites by delivering Joe Biden a THUNDERING defeat on November 3rd! #MAGA.¹⁶²

Certainly, 'liberal' by extension also refers to 'neoliberal'. This is evident from his frequent attacks, on both Twitter and during his inaugural address, towards economic policies that are

¹⁵⁷ Donald Trump, Twitter Post, November 2, 2020, 4:24 PM.

<https://www.thetrumparchive.com/?dates=%5B%222020-11-02%22%2C%222020-11-03%22%5D&results=1>

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Lind, *The New Class War*, 53.

¹⁶⁰ Fraser, *From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump*.

¹⁶¹ Lind, *The New Class War*, 53-54.

¹⁶² Donald Trump, Twitter Post, October 21, 2020, 9:47 PM.

<https://www.thetrumparchive.com/?searchbox=%22liberal%22>

associated with *neoliberalism*. However, ‘liberal’ is a far more established concept in American politics, and it arguably has a folksier appeal which resonates more forcefully among *the people* than the more academic concept ‘neoliberal’. The entire point of using ‘liberal’ is indeed to denounce his opponents and distance himself and his supporters from *the elite*. As such, ‘liberal’, or ‘neoliberal’, functions as the counter-concept of right-wing populism, which is used to bash the enemy and define *the elite* in opposition to *the people*. The corrupt media, the big tech giants and the Washington swamp, as he says, in fact cover various versions of *the elite* – the cultural, the financial and the political, respectively – which are all seen as part of the same (wealthy) neoliberal establishment which reaps the benefits of an unjust economic model and excludes *the people* from power and wealth. The prefix ‘wealthy’, used to describe the liberals, also reinforces my previous point about how economic inequality has become a more evident concern and feature of right-wing populism.

However, we should be reluctant about viewing Trump as a champion of *the people*. Mudde sees Trump as a populist who primarily promotes himself and his own brand, arguing that in spite of his criticism of *the elite*, he “does not exalt the virtues of “the (pure) people””.¹⁶³ And although he establishes *the people* as the legitimate source of power, over the course of his presidency he has failed to curtail the financial elite and instead signed off on tax policies which have benefited the top 1 percent. Concurrently, he has largely defaulted on his promises to bring back blue-collar jobs and promote working class economic interests.¹⁶⁴ I argue there is nevertheless reason to believe that Trump’s ardent rhetoric has been significant enough to damage the neoliberal armor which has protected the overclass over the past few decades. As with the Populist Revolt and the Conservative Right, Trumpism and the Modern Right have arguably changed the political discourse, forcing the political establishment to change direction.

4.3 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to demonstrate how the Modern Right challenged the neoliberal establishment, with special emphasis on economic aspects. Since the collapse of the New Deal order, economic inequality has been on the rise in the U.S; while the financial overclass has prospered, the middle class has suffered from global arbitrage strategies. Both the Tea Party movement and Trumpism reflect these long-term developments.

The analysis of *producerism* has demonstrated how Tea Partiers promoted notions of a

¹⁶³ Mudde, *The Far Right*, 49.

¹⁶⁴ Fraser, *From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump*, and María Pía Lara, “A Conceptual Analysis of the Term ‘Populism,’” *Thesis Eleven* 149, no. 1 (2018): 36-37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513618815770>.

‘moral economy’. Tea Partiers object to how the system provides benefits to ‘undeserving’ citizens who do not pay taxes, but they also criticize the federal government for rescuing corporate America after the financial crisis. As such, the role of *producerism* has changed as it has evolved into a concept that denounces anyone – whether rich or poor – for receiving support they are not entitled to. Palin, however, was especially concerned with the bailout of Wall Street and primarily targeted *the elite* for receiving special treatment. Indeed, the Modern Right shows signs of being a movement which is more aggressive towards *the elite* than the poor, which illustrates how populism has changed from the 20th to the 21st century.

The analysis of *neoliberalism* shows how populism has transformed into a political force that challenges the financial elite, similar to the influence 19th century populism had on American politics. I argue that Trump’s version of populism primarily embodies the financial vulnerability of the middle class. Both analyses in this chapter demonstrate how *the people* is framed in terms of the American middle-class and working class, which has suffered from four decades of neoliberal economic policies and a collapse in American manufacturing. *The elite* on the other hand is framed considerably in terms of ‘the financial elite’, although it also refers to a broader segment of America which has benefited from the shift towards a knowledge based and internationalized economy. Trump’s allusions to the increasing wealth gap also suggest a shift in the concept of populism, which more clearly than before recognizes economic inequality as a contentious political issue.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to answer *how the meaning and role of populism has changed from the Populist Revolt to Trump*. The Populist Revolt of the 19th century not only introduced populism as a concept, it also laid the foundations for American populism which since then has been a reoccurring phenomenon in American society. Consequently, the Populist Revolt has served as natural point of reference to address how populism has changed its meaning and played a role in American society through time. In order to do so, I have compared and contrasted the Populist Revolt with the Conservative Right movement of the 20th century and the Modern Right of the 21st. The analysis of these movements has revealed both change and continuity within the concept of populism throughout history.

As the analysis has demonstrated, the dichotomy between *the people* and *the elite* is a centerpiece within the tradition of populism, but who these categories have referred to historically has been subject to changes. Populists identify as *the people*, which is why the concept establishes who the populists are in relation to everyone else. *The people* is an ‘empty signifier’, which means that *the people* can be redefined according to the sociopolitical context. Throughout American history, *the people* has been closely associated with the concept of *producerism*, which has been used to mobilize American producers against a political or financial elite.

During the Populist Revolt, the ‘producers’ referred to farmers and laborers who mobilized against an economic system that was biased towards the financial elite. *Producerism* played a critical role in devising *the people* as hard-working farmers and laborers who promoted an economy based on equality and fairness. The Populist Revolt arguably expanded the way it did because it successfully managed to define *the people* in a way that appealed to the great masses of suppressed producers across rural America. *The elite*, on the other hand, most strikingly referred to the ‘monopolists’ of the financial overclass who built their fortunes on the hard work of the producers, but the close association between big business and the political establishment gave *the elite* an even broader meaning which was not purely limited to the financial elite.

The Conservative Right associated *the elite* more readily with political power than with financial power. Both Wallace and Nixon largely supported the economic policies of the New Deal order, and none of them convincingly portrayed *the elite* in respect to economic power. Contrarily, Wallace created a narrative of federal tyranny in which *the people* was subject to a political elite which enforced liberal social policies from above without state

approval. By associating *the elite* with federal tyranny, Wallace exploited a fundamental American reflex against oppression which dates back to the American revolution. Consequently, *the elite* was cast in terms of political power and not financial power, which was more clearly the case during the Populist Revolt. However, my analysis of the Conservative Right suggests that *the elite* as a concept played a less prominent role in this context, which is linked to how right-wing populism defined ‘the enemy’ more readily in terms of disadvantaged groups. This deviation from the typical people vs. elite dichotomy represents a change in the concept of populism.

Nixon’s strategy largely depended on a clear definition of *the people* as the *silent majority*; a strategy which skillfully avoided the contentious issue of race, but nevertheless established *the people* as the American producers who work hard, abide by the law and pay their taxes. Importantly, Nixon’s *silent majority* referred to ‘middle America’, which suggests a change in the concept of *producerism*, and consequently *the people*, which at this point in time not only referred to working class Americans (such as farmers and laborers) but to a broader ‘middle segment’ existing in between the poor and the rich.

The Tea Party movement similarly associates *the people* with the American producer. Although Tea Partiers predominantly belonged to the upper middle class, Sarah Palin nevertheless associates *the people* with *producerism* by appealing to the American heartland. Tea Partiers also clearly identify with traditional producerist values, as they promote a welfare system rooted in notions of deservedness. Similarly, with respect to Trumpism, *the people* is closely associated with the working class. His emphasis on blue collar workers and the collapse of the manufacturing industry suggests that *the people* is associated with the ‘losers’ of *neoliberalism*, i.e., the blue-collar workers. Consequently, the Modern Right represents a more explicit appeal to the working-class which suggests a narrowing of *the people*, as compared to Nixon’s broad *silent majority* definition.

The Tea Party movement establishes a clear link between *the elite* and Wall Street, but *the elite* also refers to the political establishment which cooperates with the financial elite. Trumpism establishes *the elite* in very broad terms by associating it with the entire (neo)liberal establishment which consists of a financial, cultural and political elite. They are all seen as the ‘winners’ of *neoliberalism*, and Trump’s broad framing of *the elite* has served him and his movement well in terms of forging a broad coalition against ‘the winners’. Consequently, the Modern Right has reintroduced the narrative of people vs. elite in a manner that resonates with 19th century populism and sets it apart from 20th century right-wing populism.

The conflict between *the people* and *the elite* is fundamentally a story about returning power to *the people*. The populist tradition maintains that *the people* is the only legitimate source of power, and whenever the federal government fails to reflect the *general will*, a populist reaction follows. It is perhaps more precise to argue that American populism reflects issues with broad political representation. The nature of the two-party system in America necessarily makes broad political representation difficult to accomplish. During the Populist Revolt, the Democratic and Republican parties were accused of paying too much attention to the interests of the financial elite, and too little to the interests of farmers and laborers. The Conservative Right responded to how the liberal establishment paid too much attention to minority groups and the poor, while neglecting the interests of ‘middle America’ in the 20th century. Similarly, in the 21st century, right-wing populism responded to how the neoliberal establishment had represented the interests of Wall Street while neglecting the interests of Main Street.

Consequently, American populism has served an important democratic role in terms of promoting the interests of *the people* and elevating the *general will* of the producers. However, populism also represents a democratic problem due to the exclusionary nature of *the people* as a category, which serves to make the *general will* a little less general. Although the Populist Revolt depended on a definition of *the people* which was broad enough to appeal to all those who objected to *monopolism*, blacks were excluded from the movement.¹⁶⁵ The Populist Revolt did, however, not actively *promote* a racist agenda in the way that Wallace did in the 1960s, which much more explicitly excluded blacks from the populist movement he fronted and indeed exacerbated racial tensions in America.

Similarly, the producerist tradition which *the people* is linked to effectively excludes the most vulnerable members of society. Nixon’s *silent majority* was based on the idea of ‘model citizens’ who work, pay their taxes and abide by the law. Although Nixon’s *silent majority* did not actively discriminate on the basis of color, such rhetoric evidently failed to include many of the financially disadvantaged black (and white) citizens Johnson’s Great Society attempted to include and elevate, and whose criminal behavior was linked to poverty. In a much similar way, Tea Partiers advocated their version of a ‘moral economy’ which, on principle, rejected such policies as affirmative action and welfare for non-contributors, which disadvantaged groups would otherwise benefit from. Moreover, and even more dramatically, Trump’s link between *the elite* and ‘liberal’ serves to exclude a huge segment of American

¹⁶⁵ Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, revised edition (New York: Cornell University Press, 2017), 40.

society which associates with liberalism.

To summarize, populism has the potential to include citizens in democratic processes, but populism might also exclude members of society on the basis of race, financial status and political affiliation, as my analysis has demonstrated. Consequently, the democratic role of populism is limited by the reach of *the people* as a category; a category which historically has been very much rooted in *producerism*. It is also limited by the concept of *the elite*, which is most certainly excluded from *the people*. The broadening of *the elite* in the 21st century indeed suggests changes within the concept of populism which has made it more exclusionary than ever before. It is nevertheless the case that populism has played an important role historically in terms of focalizing the concerns of the working class and middle class and altering the political discourse. Indeed, my analysis demonstrates that populism has largely prepared the ground for more substantial change in American society.

In the 19th century, the federal government's failure to represent the farmers' and laborers' interests essentially opened the door for grassroots activism which over the course of less than two decades challenged the political establishment through the influence of the People's Party. Although the political climate forced the People's Party to tone down its demands, as seen in the adoption of the silver platform, the producers' concerns and their increasing significance as a political force was no longer an issue which could be ignored by the political establishment. The Populist Revolt was indeed the forerunner to the Progressive Era, which regulated monopolies and corrected imbalances in the economy.

The Conservative Right similarly changed the political discourse by politicizing the issue of race, which served to halt the liberal order which had reached its height under Johnson's Great Society. Wallace's 'southern strategy' was successful to the extent that it mobilized resentful, white voters against black integration and so-called federal tyranny, thus subverting the liberal order which drew its strength from social liberal policies and a strong federal government. By doing so, Wallace's branch of populism essentially opened the door for a conservative backlash which was successfully exploited by Nixon. Nixon, however, did not revolutionize American politics; instead, he governed very much like a liberal by supporting affirmative action and a guaranteed income. Nixon nevertheless introduced notions of self-reliance and personal responsibility, which paved the way for more drastic economic and cultural reform under Ronald Reagan about a decade later.

It remains to be seen whether Donald Trump's ascendancy into politics represents similar longitudinal shifts. Scholars seem to agree, however, that Trump's policies have benefited the top 1 percent and failed to restore 'middle America' as promised. Trump's

victory and sustained assault on the neoliberal order nevertheless sends a powerful message to the political establishment about the conditions of the working class and middle class which is perhaps too significant to be overlooked. Indeed, President Biden has already proposed two massive economic packages – the American Families Plan and an infrastructure plan – amounting to more than 4 trillion dollars in federal spending, thus representing the biggest effort to expand federal government since the New Deal. These packages involve increased taxation of corporations and top earners and aim to rebuild the American middle class by addressing social and economic inequality.¹⁶⁶ As such, Trump-style populism has arguably ushered in a new political discourse with the power to dismantle the neoliberal order and address longstanding economic and social challenges in the U.S. Whether this turns out to be the case, however, remains to be seen.

The conceptual relatives I have analyzed in this thesis point towards both change and continuity within the concept of populism. The concept of *producerism* represents continuity to the extent that it has shaped the conception of *the people* and elevated the importance of a balanced economy organized after the principle of equal treatment by the government. However, while this ideology prompted farmers and laborers in the 19th century to target the rich, my examination of 20th and 21st century right-wing populism demonstrates how this ideology also has been employed to target the disadvantaged and vulnerable. As the producers have become more associated with the middle class, populism has changed into a concept which is forced to target both the poor and the rich in order to protect the status of *the people*. Indeed, populism has moved from being a concept that seeks to *elevate the people* in the 19th century; to *protect the people* in the 20th century; and to *revitalize the people* in the 21st century.

The analysis of *capitalism* demonstrates the close connection between populism and political economy in the 19th century, with the aim of creating a more impartial economy. The analysis of *liberalism* reveals a conceptual shift, as 20th century populism was more closely attuned with cultural issues than with economic issues. The Conservative Right, however, also represented an effort to limit the power of federal government and leave more autonomy to the states, in stark contrast to 19th century populism which advocated more government

¹⁶⁶ Jim Tankersley, “Biden Details \$2 Trillion Plan to Rebuild Infrastructure and Reshape the Economy,” *The New York Times* online, published March 31, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/31/business/economy/biden-infrastructure-plan.html> and Dana Goldstein and Jim Tankersley, “Biden Details \$1.8 Trillion Plan for Workers, Students and Families,” *The New York Times* online, published April 28, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/28/us/politics/biden-american-families-plan.html?action=click&module=Spotlight&pgtype=Homepage>

intervention. The Modern Right of the 21st century reintroduces economic issues as a priority concern. Similar to how the producers of the 19th century protested to the dynamics of corporate capitalism which favored the ‘monopolists’, Trump protested the dynamics of the neoliberal economic order which had led to the collapse of the American manufacturing industry. However, the Modern Right also brought attention to economic inequality and the increasing wealth gap in American society. Consequently, whereas ‘equality in the market’ has been a consistent force behind populism so far, Trumpism also reflects notions of ‘economic inequality’ which has been a missing element from American populism historically, suggesting a change in terms of the role of populism in political economy.

The history of American populism is a complex story of how Americans have sought to influence and shape politics through democratic participation. American populism has shown continuity in terms of establishing *the people* as the legitimate source of power, but who *the people* pertains to has been subject to change. The concept of *producerism* also represents continuity within the concept of populism, but as the representation of *the people* has changed, *producerism* has been employed differently to target those groups – rich, poor, black, liberal – who represent a threat to *the people*. The shift towards right-wing populism in the 1960s represents a dramatic change, as the concept promoted racism and served to *suppress* vulnerable members of society, in stark contrast to how populism served to *promote* farmers in the 19th century. In the 21st century, populism has become a political force that polarizes American society by framing a vast proportion of America as the ‘liberal’ enemy. Secondly, Trumpism illustrates how populism has evolved into a dominant political power, executed from the highest office in the country, in stark contrast to how populism in the 19th century started as a grassroots phenomenon that had to make compromises in order to influence national politics.

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Appendix: How this thesis is relevant for educators

Populism is highly pertinent to our times as a political phenomenon, and the topic is especially relevant for disciplines such as civics and English studies. Although populism tends to be portrayed in negative terms in current debates, it is fundamentally about democratic participation, which calls for nuanced discussions of the topic. Furthermore, (American) populism can be seen as a reaction against poor political representation, as my thesis has demonstrated. Consequently, studying populism in the classroom can teach students more about the reach and limits of democracy.

Democracy and citizenship is one of the new cross-curricular subjects introduced by the new national curriculum, which emphasizes the overall educational relevance of my thesis.¹⁶⁷ On a more detail oriented level, civic students in high school are expected to “assess how the exercise of power affects people on the individual and societal level.”¹⁶⁸ Discussing the relationship between *the people* and *the elite* is a useful way to approach this competence aim, as it allows students to see how power (in an American context) has been employed in undemocratic ways to empower elites at the expense of *the people*. We might also compare and contrast how power is exercised in the US and Norway to understand why populism is less prominent in Norway than in the US.

English students in high school are expected to “explore and reflect on diversity and social conditions in the English speaking world based on historical contexts.”¹⁶⁹ For instance, students could compare and contrast Johnson’s Great Society and the conservative backlash in order to understand how the American political system has responded differently to social inequality and cultural and racial diversity. Students are also expected to “read, discuss and reflect on the content and language features and literary devices in various types of texts, including self-chosen texts.”¹⁷⁰ Studying concepts as language features can bring awareness to how the meaning of words change, and how they are employed differently as political tools to both unite and divide. Trump’s use of ‘liberal’ as a counter-concept to denounce his opposition can teach students about rhetorical devices and the importance of critical thinking.

¹⁶⁷ Utdanningsdirektoratet, “Democracy and citizenship” (2017), <https://www.udir.no/lk20/overordnet-del/prinsipper-for-laring-utvikling-og-danning/tverrfaglige-temaer/demokrati-og-medborgerskap/?lang=nob>

¹⁶⁸ Utdanningsdirektoratet, “Samfunnskunnskap (SAK01-01), Competence aims and assessment” (2019), <https://www.udir.no/lk20/sak01-01/kompetansemaal-og-vurdering/kv48?lang=eng>

¹⁶⁹ Utdanningsdirektoratet, “English (ENG01-04), Competence aims and assessment” (2019), <https://www.udir.no/lk20/eng01-04/kompetansemaal-og-vurdering/kv6?lang=eng>

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

