

Will the Real Populism Please Stand Up?

Writing at *The American Conservative*, Mike Lofgren tears into the guts of *Billionaire at the Barricades: The Populist Revolution from Reagan to Trump*, the latest book by Republican political commentator Laura Ingraham.

Lofgren's two key points — that Donald Trump is no populist, and that conservatism is not populism — are well-made. "A cynic," he writes, "would conclude that the term populism, when applied to Republican politics in 2017, means this: keep the rich up, the poor down, foreigners out, and everybody else distracted by scapegoats. Meanwhile, line your pockets at the public trough ... and fill your top posts with enough billionaires to make George W. Bush's cabinet look like a Soviet Workers' Council." The piece is a rewarding read.

Despite his best efforts, however, Lofgren misfires on the most basic question involved. What is populism? He surrenders — it's "hard to define" — citing various figures left and right to whom the label has been applied but whose ideologies are wildly incompatible one with another.

In fact, populism is quite easy to define. It is the separation of people into two warring classes. Let's call them "the righteous masses" and "the power elites." The populist, of course, sides with the righteous masses. It's as simple as that. But the devil is in the details of defining those two classes.

"Right-wing populism" defines the classes mendaciously. It attempts to split the righteous masses against themselves by defining (as per Lofgren above) civic, ethnic, sexual and gender minorities out of the group and the politically connected wealthy in. It's the righteous white working class and Donald Trump versus immigrants, blacks, Latinos, and the LGBTQ community.

Since it's difficult to make a case that traditionally oppressed out groups are the "power elite," they're instead portrayed as mere pawns, robots in harness to the real villains. The media. Academia. And, although the message is usually offered in dog whistle code ("the bankers," "Wall Street"), Jews.

It's a jalopy held together with intellectual baling wire and running on fear and bigotry, but Trump's presidency is far from the first time it's carried a right-wing "populist" where he wants to go.

What would a real populism look like? French writers Charles Comte and Charles Dunoyer

answered that question in the 19th century. The two classes that matter are the productive class (the “righteous masses” who earn their livings through voluntary labor and exchange) and the political class (the “power elites” who steal their livings through control of, or favors from, the organization of plunder, aka the state).

Race, national origin, language, sexual orientation, gender identity — none of these personal characteristics are relevant to a true populist orientation. The only truly meaningful class distinction is the state and its hangers-on versus the rest of us. Even Karl Marx (who stole class theory from Comte and Dunoyer then mutilated into a form that murdered millions) understood that the state is “the executive committee of the ruling class.”

Real populism is two things: It is left-wing, and it is libertarian. Trump is neither.