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The 1996 Election and Populism: Some Readings

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How can we understand the 1996 American election? Is it the spectacle described in the media: a horse race between preening candidates, a circus which turns politics into theater? Or are there actually important issues behind the personality contests? Several recent books by political scientists and historians help us to put the forthcoming American election in perspective. I discuss in this article first two books that take a global overview, then a number of others specifically on the American scene, and analyze the readings they afford, especially on populism.

In 1992 a young Japanese-American scholar named Francis Fukuyama published a book, celebrated since, entitled *The End of History and the Last Man*. Fukuyama argues that with the collapse of Communism and the conclusion of the Cold War, the age of ideology has come to an end. "We who live in stable, long-standing liberal democracies face an unusual situation," writes Fukuyama, explaining:

> In our grandparents' time, many reasonable people could foresee a radiant socialist future in which private property and capitalism had been abolished, and in which politics itself was somehow overcome. Today, by contrast, we have trouble imagining a world that is radically better than our own, or a future that is not essentially democratic and capitalist. (46)

Unfortunately, things have not turned out that way. The new world order promised by President Bush more resembles global disorder. In Western Europe, democratically elected governments are discredited almost daily by revelations of corruption and mismanagement. In Eastern Europe, discredited Communists return to power as impoverished voters turn against market economies. In the United States, voters in both parties become restive as the disparities between rich and poor grow alarmingly. "The end of the Cold War has called time on our notion of the West as an idyll protected by force," notes the German social critic Hans Magnus Enzensberger, adding that "No one was prepared for this turn of events. No one knows what to do. It could be that we have entered an entirely new phase of politics" (14).

In *Civil Wars* (1994), Enzensberger focuses on two instances of global breakdown: the proliferation of civil wars and the increasing migrations of peoples. He states that classic civil wars tended to be ideological clashes involving competing governments or super-powers, but with the end of the Cold War they have been replaced by "molecular" civil wars (20) in which violence is liberated from ideology and destruction becomes not the means but the end. One result is forced mass migration which now goes under the hygienic name of "ethnic cleansing." Yet another demographic problem is the mass uprooting of people as the new global economy renders whole nations superfluous. He writes: "In the language of economics that means: an enormously increasing supply of human beings is faced with a declining demand. Even in wealthy societies people are rendered superfluous daily. What should be done with them?" (116).

In different ways, Fukuyama and Enzensberger are describing two global tendencies. By "the end of history," Fukuyama means the drive towards global integration: the march towards what President Clinton has called "market democracies." By "civil wars," Enzensberger means the drift towards global disintegration: the proliferation of separatist movements which, peacefully or violently, reject efforts at the globalization of economy, society and culture. In a recent book provocatively entitled *Jihad vs. McWorld* (1995), political scientist Benjamin Barber explores both tendencies and their consequences. "History is not over," asserts Barber (3). Instead, for him, the Cold War has been supplanted by a new struggle between local cultural and global commercial interests, neither of which is particularly interested in promoting democracy. As he puts it:

> Jihad and McWorld operate with equal strength in opposite directions, the one driven by parochial hatreds, the other by universalizing markets, the one re-creating ancient subnational and ethnic borders from within, the other making national borders porous from without. Yet Jihad and McWorld have this in common: they both make war on the sovereign nation-state's democratic institutions. (6)

By "McWorld," Barber means the irresistible economic and cultural forces colonizing the world:

> [the] onrushing economic, technological and ecological forces that demand integration and uniformity and that mesmerize peoples everywhere with fast music, fast computers, and fast food--MTV, Macintosh, and McDonald's--pressing nations into one homogeneous global theme park, one McWorld tied together by communications, information, entertainment and commerce. (4)

Barber calls this brave new McWorld the "infotainment telesector" (137). Here power does not answer to the needs of sovereign nations but to the demands of multinational corporations. "Their customers are not citizens of a particular nation or members of a parochial clan: they belong to the universal tribe of consumers defined by needs and wants that are ubiquitous, if not by nature then by the cunning of advertising" (23). As the chairman of one multinational corporation put it: "I do not find foreign countries foreign" (qtd. in Barber 23). Welcome to McWorld, writes Barber.

By *Jihad*, Barber means not simply the moral armed struggle of believers against faithlessness associated with militant Islamic movements but "a more generic form of fundamentalist opposition to modernity that can be found in most world religions" (205). He argues that this is a movement which celebrates difference, excoriates "the Other," and privileges tribe over nation, periphery over center, collectivity over individualism, religious values over secular ones, parochial culture over that which is cosmopolitan, and local institutions over global ones. It is a movement which, in various guises, encircles the globe: from the Ayatollahs of Iran to ethnic separatists in Yugoslavia and ultranationalists in Russia, from the new right in Germany and France to the so-called Moral Majority in the United States. "Caught between Babel and Disneyland, the planet is falling precipitously apart and coming reluctantly together at the very same moment" (4).

Jihad and McWorld struggle against each other; but they need each other as well. They are antagonistic and interdependent. Barber offers some striking examples. In Iran, the faithful heed the mullahs in mosques and then watch Dynasty on Star Television via satellite dish. In Russia, the Orthodox Church renews an ancient faith and enters a joint venture with California businessmen to market natural waters under the name of Saint Springs Water Company. In Germany, neo-Nazis use rock music to attract recruits to their war against decadent culture, while in the United States religious fundamentalists challenge secular modernity on the Internet.

Barber notes how Jihad and McWorld function in dialectical fashion. For instance, in Russia attempts to establish the free market economy of McWorld have brought forth stormy reactions in the form of Jihad. The introduction of economic shock therapy, untempered by ameliorating social policy, created a new society of few winners and many losers. *Glasnost*, symbolizing reform, gave way to *Naglost*, meaning "anything goes" (248). In the new era of "wild capitalism," a criminal alliance is made between former Communist apparatchiks and traditional gangsters to strip the country of its public wealth. The journalist Stephen Handelman has called these reborn capitalists "comrade criminals"; some observers estimate that they control 40 percent of the Russian GNP. The result has been not simply a calamitous drop in living standards for most Russians but a sharp decline in quality of life as well. Male life expectancy has fallen below sixty years, fifteen years below Western Europe standards and slightly lower than Indonesia or the Philippines. The birth rate has fallen by a third at the same time. Russia now exhibits characteristics associated with both Jihad and McWorld: Third World morality rates and First World birth rates.

"Markets may liberate but what they have liberated in the East has been reactionary resentment," explains Barber (252). In Russia, the former Communists led by Gennady Zyuganov, and Vladimir Zhirinovsky's misnamed Liberal Democrats have benefited from the public recoil against economic reform that has reduced Yeltsin's popularity. However, in campaigning for re-election, Yeltsin has repudiated his own liberalizing policies by firing and alienating market reformers

and political reformers alike. Are the Russian presidential election results a victory for Jihad or McWorld? Probably neither, since although Yeltsin has won, he will be held responsible more than before for cleaning up the mess left by seventy years of Bolshevik bankrupt policies. In any case, the struggle between them will continue.

Meanwhile in the United States, home of McWorld, there is a similar revolt. Barber identifies this movement with "the antiestablishmentarian fundamentalism of the Christian Right, the Jihad of profoundly antimodern fundamentalist Protestants who rebel against the culture of disbelief generated by the McWorld that is in their midst" (212). For him, the criminal face of Jihad is identified with proliferating right-wing militias held responsible for the 1995 bombing in Oklahoma City. The respectable face of Jihad is represented Pat Buchanan who told the 1992 Republican national convention that America faced a cultural battle between liberal secularists and conservative Christians that amounted to a holy war. Conservatives such as Buchanan and Senator Bob Dole have targeted Hollywood and television, the pillars of "infotainment" McWorld, as promoters of permissiveness. Barber notes, "Moral preservationists, whether in America, Israel, Iran or India, have no choice but to make war on the present to secure a future more like the past: depluralized, monocultured, unskepticized, reenchanted" (215).

Yet there is more to Jihad than tribal irrationality. As Barber acknowledges, "However outrageous the deeds associated with Jihad, the revolt the deeds manifest is reactive to changes that are themselves outrageous" (215). Indeed, he finds a pale version of cultural and linguistic Jihad in Western separatist movements that promote the province over the capital and local democracy over centralized rule: Greens in Germany, Bretons in France, Catalans in Spain, Québecois in Canada. Barber believes, moreover, that traces of economic and cultural Jihad appear over the entire political spectrum: the revolt against McWorld appears on both left and right. Just as Communists and ultranationalists join in opposing market reforms in Russia, so far left and far right unite in opposing Maastricht in France and Denmark.

So, American politicians are not alone in suffering the slings and arrows of outraged voters: in other Western democracies, contempt for ruling governments-if not for government itself-is sometimes greater. Does this help to explain the mood of the American electorate in 1996? Possibly. General anxiety about the new world disorder, in which transnational corporations usurp national sovereignty, illegal commercial culture subverts communal values, illegal immigration undercuts the domestic labor market and centralized rule undermines participatory democracy, has spread to North America. Here trade unionists and economic nationalists battle against NAFTA and unregulated free trade; cultural conservatives and radical feminists attack the media for promoting permissiveness and exploiting women; and rugged individualists and civil libertarians assault the excesses and intrusions of Big Government. In this election year, this revolt has many faces but, I suggest, only one name: populism.

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In 1996 all the candidates are running as populists. Since populism is a big tent, there is room for everybody. Like Jihad, populism is fueled by the politics of resentment. Traditionally, in the United States it has had three faces: one, cultural populism, which rejects cosmopolitan values; two, political populism, which opposes Big Government; and three, economic populism, which attacks Big Business.

In this election campaign we have already seen all three in the race for the Republican nomination. Senator Bob Dole, charter member of the Washington elite, runs as a cultural populist attacking liberal Hollywood permissiveness. Billionaire Steve Forbes ran as a political populist claiming his flat income tax will downsize government. Pat Buchanan runs a multi-faceted campaign: as a cultural populist who is against the heresies of abortion, multiculturalism and feminism; as a political populist who is against the Washington elite; and as an economic populist who is against Wall Street, multi-national corporations and free trade. On the Democratic side, Clinton is also a populist for all seasons: eating at McDonalds, reinventing government, and defending the sanctity of Social Security.

Perhaps there is less here than meets the eye. Dole maintains that he represents family values although he is divorced, seeks campaign support in Hollywood, and, according to a new biography, displays an "utter lack of commitment to any ideals or beliefs" (qtd. in Powers 4). Forbes posed as a political outsider although he is the wealthy publisher of an influential business magazine. Buchanan is a cultural populist with a taste for fancy French food and German luxury cars; a political populist who is really a Washington insider; and an economic nationalist who used to support Free Trade and Big Business. President Clinton is also a mess of contradictions. Family values: who is Genifer Flowers? Political reformer: where is Whitewater? Economic populist: what about NAFTA and the Mexican financial bail-out?

If none of these candidates is remotely populist, why do they all wish to claim the name? Recently, in *The Populist Persuasion* (1995), historian Michael Kazin returned to a recurrent theme in American politics: the persistence of populist sentiment. Kazin argues that populism owes its popularity to the fact that it is "more an impulse than an ideology" (3). Populists champion old-fashioned patriotism, have faith in ordinary citizens, fear conspiring elites, and believe in mass movements as vehicles of social protest. American populist movements, however, are broadly middle-class, points out Kazin, more strident but less dangerously radical than their European counterparts. They confirm Alexis de Tocqueville's shrewd observation that Americans love change but dread revolutions. "Through populism," concludes Kazin, "Americans have been able to

protest social and economic inequalities without calling the entire system into question" (2).

Populism has a long history in America and it is interesting to compare the current varieties with the original model. The People's Party emerged in 1889 out of an alliance of southern and western agrarian organizations which defended the interests of indebted farmers against the banks, railroads and big business. In the 1892 election, the People's Party drew more than a million votes, out of eleven million cast, but remained a regional party. In 1896, the Populists joined forces with the Democrats in an unsuccessful attempt to form a farmer-labor alliance. After that, Populist fortunes declined.

From a distance, the original Populists might be mistaken for narrow-minded supporters of Jihad, but according to historian Lawrence Goodwyn, they were nothing of the kind. Their 1892 platform proposed a graduated income tax, public ownership of railroads, an eight-hour working day, direct election of senators, and the secret ballot. Populism was, affirms Goodwyn, "the largest democratic mass movement in American history"(vii). The People's Party was, "within mainstream politics, the last substantial effort at structural alteration of hierarchical economic forms in Modern America" (264).

The Republican victory in 1896 began thirty-six years of nearly uninterrupted control of the White House, lasting until the Great Depression. Meanwhile, as Kazin explains, the People's Party vanished and the movement split into two wings: evangelical churchgoers who became cultural populists and wage earners who became economic populists. Economic populism fueled Franklin Roosevelt's victory in 1932 when Democrats created a new coalition of underfed Southern farmers and underpaid Northern workers against Republican "malefactors of wealth." Roosevelt's election began, in turn, thirty-six years of nearly uninterrupted Democratic rule, which ended in 1968 with Richard Nixon's election.

The New Deal coalition held together for three decades, until the pressures for racial integration and social change tore it apart. Already in the 1948 election, conservative white Southerners renounced the Democrats and formed their own party, the Dixiecrats. In the 1950s, they began to vote Republican for the first time since the Civil War. Then, in 1968, Alabama Governor George Wallace, an independent candidate, had great success in recruiting Southern whites and Northern ethnics to his populist campaign against cultural, political and economic elites. Kevin Phillips, then a young Republican political analyst, detected a rising cultural populism among working-class Americans who had only recently entered the middle class. In *The Emerging Republican Majority* (1969), quickly an influential book, he described how middle-class resentment against liberal welfare policies might be harnessed by conservatives to change the political landscape.

Phillips pointed out in *The Emerging Republican Majority* what others refused to see. Many observers were so mesmerized by the "counterculture" of the 1960s that they missed the fact that a more important counterrevolution was going on in large segments of the discontented middle class. Nixon used Phillips's analysis, as the basis of his Southern strategy in 1972, to create a new big business, blue-collar coalition which he called The Silent Majority. Thus began this time two decades of nearly uninterrupted Republican Presidential rule.

In the 1980s, however, the Republican coalition began to erode as the disparities between rich and poor grew, and the pressures on the middle class increased. President Reagan exclaimed: "What I want to see above all is that this remains a country where someone can always get rich" (qtd. in Phillips,*The Politics of Rich and Poor* 52). His countrymen took him at his word, and in an orgy of government deregulation, currency devaluation and hostile corporate takeovers, nearly a million new millionaires were made, while as many blue- collar jobs were lost. Business culture began to be celebrated in magazines such as *Success* and *Entrepreneur*, and in books such as those about Chrysler Motors' Lee Ioccaca and real-estate developer Donald Trump. "Greed," declared the tycoon in Oliver Stone's film *Wall Street*, "is good." The Reagan administration agreed.

But after the orgy came the hangover. As America moved from being the world's largest creditor nation to being the world's largest debtor nation, the costs were increasingly borne by the middle class. For instance, the devaluation of the dollar in relation to the yen signalled American economic decline. A Japanese businessman explained to Democratic Congressman Richard Gephardt: "Don't you understand why we're buying Honolulu and huge chunks of other American cities? You increased the wealth of Japan vis-à-vis the United States by 100% in one year--without us even lifting a finger" (qtd. in Phillips,*The Politics of Rich and Poor* 122). Meanwhile, as the dollar fell, the comparative level of US wages and per capita incomes fell, too. In 1986, Barbara Ehrenreich noted a profound change in the class contours of American society and asked, "Is the Middle Class Doomed?" (196-207).

Phillips reported these changes in a second book, that became just as influential, entitled *The Politics of Rich and Poor* (1990), in which he indicted the Republicans for abandoning the middle class in favor of the rich. He noted that, by a series of measurements, the gap between rich and poor had increased precipitously, moving the United States ahead of even France in the concentration of wealth within a small elite. And he concluded that "No parallel upsurge of riches had been seen since the late nineteenth century, the era of the Vanderbilts, Morgans and Rockefellers" (10). The comparison with the Gilded Age was not idle: that was the era of the first Populist revolt.

It was such a situation that, in 1992, created the middle-class backlash against President Bush, as well as the third-party movement of Ross Perot, and led to the

election of Bill Clinton. Kazin suggests that Clinton found the blueprint for his populist campaign in *The Politics of Rich and Poor*. If so, Phillips may be held responsible for the two major postwar movements that claimed to be populist. At the Democratic convention Clinton declared that he accepted the nomination "in the name of all the people who do the work, pay the taxes, raise the kids, and play by the rules-the hardworking Americans who make up our forgotten middle class." He added: I am a product of the middle class. And when I am your president you will be forgotten no more." Words that may come back to haunt him in 1996.

In the three years since Clinton's inauguration, life for the American middle class has not improved. Between 1973 and 1995, real weekly wages for rank and file workers fell by 18 percent. Even in the last five years of economic recovery, real wages have not increased. By contrast, from 1979 to 1989, real annual pay for corporate chief executives increased by 19 percent and by 66 percent after taxes. Today, the average CEO makes 175 times as much as his average worker. Last year, the respected investment banker Felix Rohatyn concluded: "What is occurring is a huge transfer of wealth from lower-skilled, middle-class American workers to the owners of capital assets and to a new technological aristocracy with a large element of compensation tied to stocks" (qtd. in Head 47).

Meanwhile, American politics remain volatile. The Republicans triumphed in the 1994 congressional elections with their "Contract with America." But their inability to implement it, exemplified by their clumsy handling of the budget crisis, has brought down their approval ratings alarmingly. On the other hand, Clinton's popularity has risen sharply from all-time lows in 1993, but he still remains vulnerable on issues like Whitewater, Bosnia, foreign trade and above all, the economy. However, the public shows no great enthusiasm for any declared candidate and still dreams of an independent Prince Charming, such as Colin Powell, who will sweep them off their feet. Instead of Powell, American voters will likely have two more populist choices: billionaire Perot on the right and consumer advocate Ralph Nader on the left.

Can Prince Charming save the Republic? Phillips thinks not. In his most recent book,*Arrogant Capital* (1995), he indicts not only both political parties but the entire political system as well. It is not Republicans or Democrats but Washington, the arrogant capital, that is the problem. Phillips describes a closed political system run by corrupt politicians, mandarin bureaucrats, foreign lobbyists, greedy lawyers and compromised journalists. He offers some striking statistics. In 1930, the combined total of Congressional staff members was under 1500; by 1970, it had climbed to more than 10,000. In 1940, the State Department employed 6438 people; by 1970, the figure was 39,603. In 1950, less than 1000 lawyers were members of the District of Columbia Bar; by 1975, the number had increased to 21,000. Phillips thinks that these numbers rose to "a negative critical mass" in the 1970s. By now the growth is cancerous: in addition to the vast government bureaucracies, there are 90,000 lobbyists, 60,000 lawyers, 12,000 journalists.

"Washington was not simply a concentration of vested interests; in a sense, the nation's richest city had itself become a vested interest--a vocational entitlement--of the American political class" (37).

Phillips doubts that this entrenched power can be uprooted by either political party or any independent candidate. Instead, he advocates more radical institutional measures, such as decentralizing and dispersing power away from Washington; curbing the role of lobbyists and lawyers; regulating speculative finance and multinational corporations; reforming the tax system and reducing the disparity between rich and poor; as well as opening up the outdated two-party system and shifting representative government more toward direct electronic democracy. He makes a daunting list of utopian proposals that are still a far cry from the spirit of classic populism.

Meanwhile, the 1996 election will be fought out along populist lines. Kazin points out that

> beginning in the mid-1980s, populism became something of a fashion statement as pundits affixed the term to talk-show hosts, rock musicians and film directors. The clothing outlet Banana Republic even introduced its "Men's 100% Cotton Twill POPULIST pants... steeped in grass-roots sensibility and the simple good sense of solid workmanship. " (271)

Current populist politicians such as Clinton, Dole and Buchanan are strictly in the Banana Republic tradition. But as Kazin notes, "Like the American dream itself, populism lives too deeply in the fears and expectations of American citizens to be trivialized or replaced." He concludes, "We should not speak solely within its terms, but, without it, we are lost" (284).

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