‘STARS AND BARS’: UNDERSTANDING RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN THE USA

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The scourge of right-wing populism has spread throughout the capitalist world. It has had stunning success posing as radical alternative to so-called mainstream or elite politics. Yet insofar as the new, right-wing populist movements have been successful in creating a new ‘master frame’ (combining ethno-nationalist xenophobia with anti-political establishment populism), the cautionary note is that each right-wing populist movement is not a clone of another, and that while they all utilize the same master frame, each movement/party must pay attention to nationally specific conditions. Thus, the title of this paper, ‘Stars and Bars’, references the flag of the Confederate States of America, which, in many respects, is the near mythic point of origin and conceptual framework of right-wing populism in the USA today.

The contemporary left, still enmeshed in the crisis of socialism, has had great difficulty coming to grips with the rise of this phenomenon. In some cases, as with the emergence of the Tea Party movement beginning in 2009, much of the left is prepared to discount right-wing populist initiatives or movements as simply public relations acts by neoliberal capital. In failing to come to terms with right-wing populism, the left is presented with a situation that it not only cannot fully grasp, but about which it cannot develop an appropriate counter strategy.

Too much of the left tends to view anything that is repressive and heinous on the part of the capitalist state as representing ‘fascism’ or alternatively what was once called the ‘fascization’ of the capitalist state. Such an analysis objectively romanticizes ‘democratic capitalism’ and misunderstands right-wing populism generally and fascism in particular. Fascism comes to be portrayed as simply a variant of counter-revolution rather than a social movement of a specific type, ultimately linked to a very particular form of
the capitalist state. The conflating of repression, authoritarianism, right-wing populism and fascism misses certain fundamentals of democratic capitalism. Democratic capitalism is not a benign state. The USA, for instance, has the most violent history of labour-capital relations among the developed capitalist states. Democratic capitalist states, as well as their political and civil society allies, have engaged in vicious repression of opponents, whether within the working-class movement or other progressive social movements. The utilization of extra-judicial killings (e.g., lynchings), blacklisting, purges and historical omissions have all been essential in the response of the ruling elite to the class struggle and other democratic/anti-oppression movements, in no way contradicting the existence of what is termed ‘bourgeois democracy’ or democratic capitalism.

When the left suggests that heavy repression serves as a sign that the state has evolved into fascism it misunderstands the nature of the democratic capitalist state. The Black Panther Party in the late 1960s and early 1970s claimed that fascism (albeit a new form of fascism) had arrived in the USA. It was easy to understand, at one level, how this analysis arose given the extent of the repression that the Panthers suffered at the hands of the state. Nevertheless, what they missed was not so much what was happening to them, but what was not happening more broadly, i.e., there was no fundamental altering of the state.³

What the left was correctly sensing beginning in the 1970s, however, was a modification of the democratic capitalist state and a tendency towards a new form of state, though not fascist, whether one conceptualizes a 1930s style fascism or a more modern version. The democratic capitalist state has been undergoing a shift in which democracy is declining and the parameters for democratic activity, debate and, in fact, civil liberties have been shrinking. Again, this is not to be identified with the alleged rise of fascism. What Nicos Poulantzas perceptively noted by the end of the 1970s was

the emergence of authoritarian statism [which] cannot be identified either with a new fascist order or with a tendency towards fascism. The present-day State is neither the new form of a genuine exceptional State nor, in itself, a transitional form on the road to such a State: it rather represents the new “democratic” form of the bourgeois republic in the current phase of capitalism.⁴

Yet the emergence of what now might be called the neoliberal authoritarian state since the 1970s must itself be distinguished from the growth of right-wing populism. Recognizing this is fundamental to the development of any left analysis, let alone strategies and tactics in confronting the political right.
Right-wing populism describes a very broad phenomenon that, in non-class terms, identifies a specific subject which has become the victim of callous, greedy and alien elites. The terms in which right-wing populism operates are not anti-capitalist, but may be anti-corporate, and in almost every case, nationalist. As the path-breaking book by Chip Berlet and Matthew Lyons, *Right-wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort*, put it:

Right-wing populist movements are a subset of repressive populist movements. A *right-wing populist movement*, as we use the term, is a repressive populist movement motivated or defined centrally by a backlash against liberation movements, social reform or revolution. This does not mean that right-wing populism’s goals are only defensive or reactive, but rather that its growth is fueled in a central way by fears of the Left and its political gains.

Right-wing populism, as an insurgent ideology and movement, has the advantage over the political left of being linked to the *origin myth* of the social formation within which it has developed. Specifically, it does not critique the origin of the nation-state (instead mythologizing it), but rather sets about redefining the nation-state, its history and the ‘relevant’ population(s) constituting it. The existence of both the tendency towards the development of the neoliberal authoritarian state and the growth of right-wing populism creates major challenges for the left. By first recognizing that these developments are not one and the same thing, we make tremendous advances towards the construction of a political strategy of resistance and counter-attack.

What is of particular political importance is the recognition that neoliberal capital does not have identical interests with the right-wing populist movements, particularly that segment of neoliberal capital that is linked with the transnational capitalist class. The domestic objectives of right-wing populist movements may serve neoliberal capital insofar as they aim to counter progressive social movements – including their opposition to demands for wealth redistribution (domestically or internationally) – but to the extent to which right-wing populist movements aim to promote various forms of isolationism, protectionism and anti-migrant xenophobia, this frequently runs directly into the buzz saw of global capitalism’s long-term objectives of so-called free trade and flexible labour markets.
II

Because right-wing populism looks for scapegoats it especially focuses on the identification of so-called legitimate and illegitimate populations. Right-wing populism cannot be understood outside of an analysis of ‘race’. This is true at the global level as well as in individual nation-states. It is because of this basic fact that much of the left – specifically but not exclusively white leftists – finds itself regularly confused at the strategic and tactical levels in their approaches towards right-wing populist parties and movements. Some on the left seem to think that the ‘right-wing’ can be extracted from ‘right-wing populism’, thereby making the movement progressive and acceptable. This misses a very fundamental issue. ‘Right-wing populism’ is not ‘right-wing + populism’ but is rather an integral phenomenon. Holding that phenomenon together are several chords, one of the most important being race.  

Race, old and new, serves as a convenient mechanism to displace anger about neoliberal globalization and focus it on other victims of globalization, specifically today’s migrants. Yet non-migrants are also targets of today’s racism. Whether African Americans and non-migrant Latinos in the USA, or North Africans in Europe who have lived there for generations, right-wing populism suggests that such specially oppressed communities serve to bring down the larger society. The economic redundancy that is frequently evidenced in these communities due to large-scale unemployment is blamed on the communities themselves rather than on neoliberal globalization and racial/national oppression. Crime and other anti-social behaviours become the focus of discussions and these communities either must be walled off or otherwise excluded from established society. Right-wing populism utilizes neo-racism as a means of convincing the so-called ‘native’ populations that they are not actually racists; in fact, that they are realists. It argues that it is correct and understandable for so-called native populations to believe that outsiders, aliens, are watering down their culture. It is not far from such a standpoint that one soon is arguing that these aliens represent a security, if not existential threat to the so-called native population. Thus, campaigns against mosques serve as a mobilizing and recruiting mechanism for right-wing populism. As Etienne Balibar noted in the early 1990s:

The new racism is a racism of the era of ‘decolonization’, of the reversal of population movements between the old colonies and the old metropolises, and the division of humanity within a single political space. Ideologically, current racism, which in France centres upon the immigration complex, fits into a framework of ‘racism without races’ which is already widely developed in other countries, particularly the
Anglo-Saxon ones. It is a racism whose dominant theme is not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences, a racism which, at first sight, does not postulate the superiority of certain groups or peoples in relation to others but ‘only’ the harmfulness of abolishing frontiers, the incompatibility of life-styles and traditions.\textsuperscript{9}

One must hasten to add that not all immigrants serve as targets of right-wing populism. In the USA there is no mass movement against East European immigrants, regardless of how concerned law enforcement may be about the power of the Russian mafia, for instance. There has been little concern in the USA about Irish immigration since the late nineteenth century. Right-wing populist movements serve as one of the gates into the ‘white bloc’.

Especially in the context of the USA, the new racism takes place in the context of a declining living standard for white workers brought up believing a racial hierarchy would protect all or most of them from the ravages of capitalism. To put it in blunt terms, that no matter how bad things might get, there would always be a person of colour beneath them who was worse off. But the wage stagnation among white workers and a demographic diversification within the ruling circles – ultimately leading to a Black President – made it apparent that there were now people in positions of power above many whites, people who 30-50 years ago would never have risen to such stature. While the ruling elite in the USA remains overwhelmingly white, in stark terms, the dilemma facing many whites is that it appears that it does not pay to be white anymore. In other words, there is a question that has emerged about their racial (and imperial) privileged status. The vitriolic hatred of President Obama by the right-wing populists, e.g., the Tea Party, is a manifestation of this sentiment in the political arena.

At the international level, this ironically reinforces the myth that the global North is post-racial. It suggests that this post-racial world has been to the disadvantage of white/native populations who are now the victims of immigrant invaders and/or emerging powers within the global South that will ultimately marginalize much of the global North. The new racism is imbued with paranoia and has concluded that the tables have been turned on the ‘legitimate’ populations by ‘illegitimate’ ones.

\textit{III}

‘The Holocaust is a lie…. Obama was created by Jews…. Jews captured America’s money. Jews control the mass media’.

– From the handwritten notes of James Wenneker von Brunn, alleged killer of a security guard at the Holocaust Museum in 2009.\textsuperscript{10}
The Southern Poverty Law Center, a nationally renowned centre which monitors extremists groups, has estimated that there are 939 hate groups operating in the USA, an increase of 56 per cent since 2000. By ‘hate groups’ SPLC is referencing organizations that malign and target entire groups of people with what they call ‘immutable characteristics’.

Though SPLC includes a few alleged Black hate groups, overwhelmingly these are white, right-wing formations, many of which operate in some paramilitary style and are frequently well armed. Their actual numbers are unclear though in 2009 the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund suggested estimates. What is key is not the actual numbers of members but rather the extent of the influence.

Right-wing extremists are largely ignored in the USA except when there is some sort of catastrophic incident, such as the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. Worse, when attention is brought to these extremists, it is frequently discounted and/or ridiculed. A case in point was the 2009 leaking and subsequent suppression of the Department of Homeland Security analysis of right-wing extremism. Additionally, we see in the US media a regular tendency to inflate Islamic-inspired terrorism over domestic right-wing terrorism.

Nevertheless, by focusing on the most extreme right-wing groups in isolation we can easily miss the larger right-wing populist tendency, not only of which they are part but which they are helping, to various degrees, to influence. As Berlet and Lyons note, today’s right-wing populism in the USA largely breaks down into three main tendencies. These include groups and individuals who are into a ‘get the government off my back’ orientation; xenophobes and ethno-nationalists; and ultra-conservative Christian evangelicals. Understanding these tendencies helps one to grasp that right-wing populism is not limited to what are frequently and derisively referenced as ‘wing nuts’, but instead is actually a vast social movement, albeit one that is in many respects quite contradictory.

In order to appreciate the growth and influence of right-wing populism in the USA it is useful to focus on the politics of right-wing populism. I would argue that it could be best summarized as ‘neo-Confederate’. The term ‘neo-Confederate’, however, is generally reserved for a specific tendency within the ranks of right-wing populism. Specifically, those who are racist, sexist, historical revisionists (regarding the Civil War) and may currently adhere to variations of secessionism. I suggest that we need to view the term on a much broader scale in order to better understand today’s character of right-wing populism in the USA.

One of the oddities of US history is that the Confederate States of America
(CSA) could in any way become the critical image for a populist movement. Right-wing populism, as Berlet and Lyons note, has its ‘genetic’ origin in the combination of settler colonialism, the slave trade and the period of so-called Jacksonian Democracy. The Jacksonian period produced the image of the hard-working white man standing against an elite; a white man seeking to head out on his own, seize land and make something of himself. The CSA, in contrast, was elitist and hierarchical. The leaders of the CSA thought next to nothing about the common white man (let alone white woman), except that they were useful in advancing the objectives of said elite.

The CSA was, however, an imperial project – in a generic sense – which sought not to restrict itself to its eleven states (plus affiliated territories) but to expand west and south. It promoted itself as not only supporting slavery but also advancing states’ rights (although, ironically, the CSA Constitution did not provide for secession from the CSA). Expansion, for both the CSA and the USA, provided an opportunity to promote myths about freedom for the common person. Through expansion land would open up for the common (white) person. And, of course, every white person would be able to obtain slaves.

The CSA abolished political parties based on the notion that political parties were, by definition, corrupting. Nevertheless, struggles unfolded within the CSA Congress that broke down on various factional lines. The absence of parties promoted illusions about democracy in the slavery-based nation-state. Of course, labour unions did not exist in the CSA and civil liberties, even for whites, were severely constrained. There was an internal pass system which restricted movement within the CSA. Nevertheless, the CSA, more than anything else, represents a critical image for many right-wing populists. It is, in some respects, less about what the CSA actually represented than the ideas and fantasies that people have subsequently invested in it.

The suggestion that the politics of US right-wing populism is, essentially, neo-Confederate does not so much start by recognizing the nostalgia for the CSA but rather by the fact that the US Civil War never quite ended. As a result of the betrayal and overthrow of Reconstruction, many of the basic issues over which the Civil War was fought were put on hold, or perhaps better phrased, contained. The principal goal of the northern capitalist class in the 1860s was ensuring that the path toward the development of a modern, industrial capitalist state was not derailed. This meant the use of tariffs and the promotion of (technically) free – rather than slave – labour. They additionally wanted guarantees of a strong federal government to promote further westward expansion and consolidation. While there were elements
of the northern capitalist class — and specifically, political representatives in the Republican Party — who sought to ‘cleanse’ the former CSA of its antebellum ruling class, the submission of the latter was quite acceptable for most of the northern elite. As a result, a reconstituted southern elite was given free reign over the former CSA as long as it refrained from promoting further discussions of secession and supported the national and international objectives of the now dominant northern industrial capitalist class. The South became a one-party (Democratic Party) dictatorship that was permitted to carry out the de facto re-enslavement of the African American. This was accomplished through the class collaboration of the bulk of the southern white working class and farmers with the southern elite, a collaboration on the basis of their relatively privileged position vis-à-vis the African American population.\textsuperscript{17} Countering this, the Black Freedom Movement has been the force which has actually been trying to lead the movement to resolve the outstanding issues of the Civil War.

Right-wing populism in the USA draws its inspiration from key elements of the CSA experience and mythology. These include, but are not limited to, white supremacy, xenophobia, sexism, states’ rights, contradictory imperial and isolationist tendencies, conservative Christianity, and militarism. These elements of right-wing populism in the USA, as Berlet and Lyons note, have congealed through the twentieth century in response/reaction to the progressive motions, and most particularly the social movements of the 1950s through early 1970s. These social movements, even in non-revolutionary form, challenged many of the basic origin myths associated with the formation and development of the USA. Whether these myths are associated with race, gender relations or the actual development of what became the USA, they each have served as critical oppressive elements in keeping the larger social order together.

The Confederacy, then, is among other things the equivalent in the USA of the ‘caliphate’ for today’s clerical fascists in groups such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. It is a critical image or moment that, in most respects, never existed but is invented as a way of positing a future world or objective for said movement. Neo-Confederate politics operate in many, if not most of the right-wing populist projects of this era in the USA. The most obvious is the Tea Party, which has been a magnet for white nationalist organizing since its inception.\textsuperscript{18} But it is the politics contained within the Tea Party that reeks of neo-Confederate-ism. As with other right–wing populist movements, the Tea Party movement holds true to the notion of legitimate and illegitimate populations. The debate over healthcare reform, from their standpoint, was a matter of whether resources should be shared
with populations that they considered undeserving. The subtext to this debate was about race, age and class, but most immediately, race. The Tea Party has also been at the vanguard of those forces that hold that the federal government has overextended its reach beyond the boundaries set by the so-called Founding Fathers.

Right-wing populism in the USA has increasingly been drawn back towards the politics of ‘nullification’. This orientation, which emerged in the pre-Civil War period, suggested that state legislatures could invalidate those acts by the federal government that they – the state legislatures – believed to have overstepped the bounds of the US Constitution. For many of the forces that advocate nullification, it should be noted, only the first ten amendments to the US Constitution are considered legitimate, with a particular emphasis on the 10th amendment (‘the powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people’). These forces have historically argued that the expansion of the role of the federal government has been contrary to the wishes and directions of the founders of the United States and, therefore, must be reversed.

Nullification was central to the orientation of the southern plantocracy prior to the Civil War, and has re-emerged as a battle cry within the right. In Tea Party circles and others the argument has been made that actions, such as the Affordable Care Act, must be blocked at the state level and that states can and should take steps against federal action. All of this recalls the actions of southern state legislatures during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Political figures such as Ron Paul use the plank of libertarianism yet advocate for nullification, frequently deceiving or misleading progressives who have their own issues with the federal government.¹⁹

A contemporary version of nullification was represented in the right-wing populist mobilization in defense of Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy, whose armed backers challenged federal land ownership when the Bureau of Land Management moved against Bundy for his grazing violations. The Bureau retreated, perhaps fearing a repeat of the circumstances surrounding the federal assault on the Branch Dravidian compound in Waco, Texas in 1993. Bundy’s victory – asserted in terms of the need to limit federal government authority and, by implication, strengthen the imaginary supremacy of the states – has resonated in right-wing circles nationally. Bundy’s contention that his land claim is legitimately supposed to reign supreme – standing in hypocritical contrast to constituencies that actually have legitimate claims to land sovereignty, such as Native Americans – was directly linked to his settler-colonial myth of Nevada having been vacant land prior to the arrival
of Europeans.20

A logical extension of nullification is actually secession, and this has resurfaced even in polite company.21 Although it was neo-fascists in the 1980s that initially began to rearticulate secession in very apocalyptic terms, focusing on proposals that the Pacific Northwest be carved out as a whites-only republic, the extent to which secessionism has spread into more mainstream circles was seen in 2011, when Texas Governor Rick Perry, toyed with the idea in a very sly fashion:

Texas is a unique place. When we came in the union in 1845, one of the issues was that we would be able to leave if we decided to do that…. You know, my hope is that America and Washington in particular pays attention. We’ve got a great union. There is absolutely no reason to dissolve it. But if Washington continues to thumb their nose at the American people, you know, who knows what may come out of that? But Texas is a very unique place and we’re a pretty independent lot to boot.22

For many on the political left it may be difficult to recognize that the neo-Confederate message of secession is representative of a strategic pessimism on the part of many right-wing populists rather than either an engagement in political blackmail or poker. It emerges in part from the conclusion at which many right-wing populists have arrived, i.e., that the hope to install a genuine right-wing populist government at the federal level is a lost cause. Frederick Clarkson, author of Eternal Hostility: The Struggle Between Theocracy and Democracy and the co-founder of the website Talk2Action.org which covers the Christian right, has noted that the Christian right and the formal neo-Confederates have refocused much of their work at the state and local level so that they can ‘play to their strengths and maximize their power instead of tilting at windmills’. Clarkson adds: ‘Yet even with this refocusing, some are starting to despair of America herself, and to turn their thoughts to secession – even if that entails violence’.23

Right-wing populism in the USA has additionally – like its counterparts in Europe – gained renewed energy in connection with immigration. Again, neo-Confederate secessionism is one solution to what many on the political right believe to be the barbarian demographic reconstitution of the USA. Those who may not have arrived at a secessionist conclusion nevertheless have gravitated en masse to xenophobic practices including the use of armed militias to counter migration and to threaten migrants. The neo-Confederate orientation of the right-wing populism in the USA is also evidenced in the
sexist politics of a movement that actually includes large numbers of (white) women. The neo-Confederate orientation stands in defense of traditional gender roles and, as such, against all that has been represented by the women’s movement, not to mention movements for justice for lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender populations. This anti-woman stand, however, is especially contradictory when right-wing movements are led by women. Individuals within the so-called mainstream of right-wing populist politics, such as Sarah Palin or former Congresswoman Michele Bachmann, have been widely sought after and are recognized leaders of the political right who have advocated a strange form of right-wing feminism (i.e., ensuring equal opportunity for women to attack the goals and objectives of the women’s movement).

Finally, consider the implications of the famous Tea Party slogan, ‘Keep your government hands off my Medicare’, during the course of the 2009 healthcare reform debate. The repeated and widespread use of this slogan suggested that healthcare must be reserved for the legitimate segment of the population and that healthcare reform, to the extent to which it might utilize resources that go towards Medicare, was inappropriate because it was to service the illegitimate segment of the population. Claire Conner, a woman whose parents were involved with the John Birch Society, has chillingly captured an earlier instance of just this sort of thinking:

I said to my mother one time … ‘What if there was no Social Security, Medicare, unemployment compensation, food stamps – no safety net at all?’ And she said, ‘Oh, it would be glorious. It would be what the Constitution intended’. I’d say, ‘Mom, the Constitution is not going to feed a hungry child’. I can still see her face looking up from her teacup, saying, ‘That’s not my concern, dear’.24

Given the neo-Confederate roots of this sort of thinking in the USA, the articulation of a movement for a ‘Third Reconstruction’, as formulated by the late Manning Marable over thirty years ago, is precisely the sort of formulation necessary to describe the sorts of alliances and trajectory necessary at this moment.25 The USA went through the original Reconstruction (1865–77); and a second de facto Reconstruction (roughly 1963–68), which both failed. Central to both of these was addressing and overcoming the racial divide. This would have to be equally central in the building of mass political movements for a Third Reconstruction, which would need to advance radical and consistently democratic reforms – what Andre Gorz called ‘non-reformist reforms’, even in a period like ours when socialism is
not on the immediate agenda.\textsuperscript{26} It would have to be a movement addressing gender and class as well as racial inequality and wealth redistribution, government transparency, increased voting rights and popular control, and demilitarization. In the context of neoliberal authoritarian statism, imperial foreign policy and the global environmental crisis, such a movement for a Third Reconstruction would obviously have very distinct limits within the context of capitalism – to suggest the opposite is delusional – but it does represent the sort of popular democratic bloc necessary to break the back of both neoliberal authoritarianism and right-wing populism.

IV
What is frequently confusing for the political left is that right-wing populism – internationally as well as in the USA – has its own critique of globalization. At times this critique can sound similar to a left analysis but the differences are essential to understand.

Among right-wing populists there is a marked tendency towards a view that we are on the road to ‘one world government’, if we are not already there. The roots of right-wing populists’ fear of and antipathy to this goes back at least as far as the creation of the United Nations, and in the US even further back to post-First World War ‘isolationism’.\textsuperscript{27} As noted above, globalization in any form runs counter to the nation-state origin myth for right-wing populism. It is in the formation of the nation-state that right-wing populism finds the Garden of Eden. Globalization and migration cast the ‘legitimate’ population out of that Garden and subject the legitimate population to control by aliens, traditionally, and still frequently, Jews, but there are many others who increasingly find themselves placed in that camp. Capitalism always involves competition for limited resources – limited not necessarily due to objective circumstance, but because the organization of capitalist society, based on stark divisions of wealth and power, militates against any concept of equitable distribution. Since, in the ideology of the right-wing populists, the nation-state must protect the ‘legitimate’ population, and they must do so regardless of the costs to the ‘illegitimate’ segments of the population, this can sometimes go so far as to carry with it intimations of genocide.

Right-wing populism’s antipathy toward globalization does not represent a basis for any sort of alliance, tactical or strategic, with the left. This is a mistake that segments of the left in Europe and North America have made particularly since the end of the Cold War.\textsuperscript{28} Right-wing populism’s opposition to globalization is grounded in the mythical notion of the purity of the nation-state. It sees ethno-national enemies of the nation-state at
every corner. Though right-wing populism may speak in terms of the poor against the rich or the people against the elite, it does so in largely non-class terms, tending to view the opponents of ‘the people’ in racial or ethno-national terms.

The challenge for the left in confronting both neoliberal authoritarianism and right-wing populism is to recognize that both are opponents of democracy and progress. That said, they must be addressed differently. The dangers from right-wing populism will not be resolved through ignoring said movements and concentrating all our attention on the neoliberal authoritarian state. Right-wing populism in power, as one can see in Hungary today, not to mention in Rwanda (1994) or Thailand, can be devastating to progressive mass movements. None of this should imply that the ‘normal’ democratic (and increasingly authoritarian) capitalist state should be seen as a positive antidote to right-wing populism.

The direct challenge to right-wing populism must be on multiple levels. To the extent that states allows right-wing populist movements to flaunt the law, promote secession and armed opposition, these states must be directly challenged. At the same time, relying on the state to crush right-wing populist movements is a separate and dangerous trap since, among other things, the state can employ the same repression against popular movements and the left. Equally dangerous is for the left to suggest that the status quo is an acceptable strategic alternative to right-wing populism, e.g., support the status quo since it is better than what right-wing populism in power would usher in. Right-wing populism will be successfully countered by the emergence of a radical, popular, democratic movement that speaks to the issues that have drawn segments of the population to right-wing populism. The left, therefore, must think in terms of the larger population and, specifically, the demographics and politics of a majoritarian popular-democratic bloc that can out-organize right-wing populism. This is one of the reasons that the labour movement should have such a central role to play in defeating right-wing populism. A reconstructed labour movement, following a path of social justice unionism, will at least have the potential to undermine the sway and pull of right-wing populism to the extent to which such a movement addresses the needs, anger and frustration of segments of the population who see their futures vanishing under the juggernaut of neoliberal globalization.

NOTES

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useful to quote at length from Rydgren here: ‘Yet, not all frames can be modified to fit
the particular national political and cultural context in which adopters are embedded,
which means that they sometimes are left out. One example of such a frame is the ardent
anti-abortion rhetoric of the Front National, which is a strategically dead issue in highly
secular protestant contexts such as Sweden and Denmark …. Yet this phenomenon
mainly relates to more detailed, derivative frames, whereas potent master frames are
potent partly because they have the capacity to fit into a wide range of different cultural
and political contexts.’ There is much that the contemporary left can learn from this. In
large part due to the cancer of post-modernism, there has been an extreme reluctance
on the part of much of the left to suggest the need for a new master frame. Instead, we
fall into relativism. The opposite extreme, of course, is one with which too many of
us are familiar whereby we adopt foreign models in their entirety and pay little to no
attention to the actual and concrete national histories, cultures and situations.

2 ‘Fascisization’ was a term made popular during the notorious Third Period in the
history of the Communist International (1928–35), and subsequently resurrected
during the 1970s by some organizations in what was then termed the ‘new communist
movement’. See: R. Palme Dutt, Fascism and Social Revolution, Chicago: Proletarian
process through which the democratic capitalist state became increasingly authoritarian
and opened up pathways for the emergence and victory of fascism. But contrary to
an instrumental view of fascism, fascism is actually a radical, right-wing, irrationalist social
movement that is antithetical to not only socialism, but also democratic capitalism. It can
find ways to coexist with certain other forms of right-wing capitalist authoritarianism,
but fascism ultimately seeks to eliminate the democratic capitalist state and replace it
with a very different sort of capitalist state. Nor is fascism merely ‘called up’ by the
bourgeoisie, as if it was some sort of monster in the basement, but is a social movement
that serves multiple functions for a segment of the bourgeoisie when there is a political
crisis. Among those is the settling of accounts with other segments of the bourgeoisie
and the introduction of a new hegemony. Again, contrary to the theory of much of
the left, fascism tends to emerge at a point when the progressive social movements are
on the retreat. This makes it different from other forms of counter-revolution in which
there is a vicious, right-wing assault on the masses, e.g., the Indonesian coup of 1965 or

3 In the 1970s, in the wake of the Watergate revelations, there were those who claimed
that this was a sign that fascism was on the horizon, as graphically seen in the title
of one left newspaper originally called the Anti-Fascist Commentator (later the People’s
Commentator). The more neo-Stalinist-leaning Communist League (later Communist
Labor Party), which published the People’s Tribune, had their own version of the alleged
fascist danger, though that led them in the direction of a ‘united front from below’,
thereby downplaying domestic class and national struggles.


5 Within right-wing populism there are various tendencies including fascism, clerical
conservatism, etc. Neo-fascists can advance a peculiar and particular form of anti-
capitalism that is largely focused on identifying the enemy as a particular racial or ethnic
group, e.g., Jewish bankers. Additionally, the anti-capitalism of the neo-fascists may
represent a vision that is almost neo-feudal in its character. In the twentieth century
when fascism has gained power it has moved against its own so-called anti-capitalists or
‘left wing’. In the case of Germany, this is what was involved with the 30 June 1934
‘Night of the Long Knives’, in which the Storm Troopers (the SA) were purged by
Hitler.
Chip Berlet and Matthew Lyons, *Right-wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort*, New York: The Guilford Press, 2000, p. 5, emphasis in the original. Any examination of right-wing populism in the USA needs to begin with reference to this outstanding work, to which I wish to pay tribute here as a source of information, analysis and inspiration in better understanding the nature of the political right in the USA.

Since ‘race’ does not exist as a scientific category, but rather a sociopolitical category, it is important to see it as the principal means of determining the ‘Other’ in today’s world. Race, as is said, is a sociopolitical construction that emerged through the process and history of the Catholic Reconquista in Iberia (driving out the Moors and the Jews) and turning Iberia into two ‘white’ Christian kingdoms; the British conquest of Ireland and the suppression of all that was Irish; the invasion of the Western Hemisphere and the genocide and colonization of the Indigenous; and the capture and importation of Africans to serve as slaves. In the New World, ‘race’ operated as a method of suppression and social control. Yet globally it was an instrument for marginalizing and demonizing the histories, cultures, experiences and perspectives of those who were identified as the ‘Other’. These were colonized and/or enslaved peoples. Race became an instrument to identify who was acceptable and legitimate in a specific society versus those who were considered outsiders. Certainly one of the best analyses of race in North America was that of the late Theodore Allen in his two-volume work, *The Invention of the White Race: Vol. 1: Racial Oppression and Social Control*, New York: Verso, 1997; and *Vol. 2: The Origins of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America*, New York: Verso, 2012.

‘Native’ in the sense of not being immigrants.


From the web page of the Southern Poverty Law Center, available at http://www.splcenter.org. The use of SPLC as a source does not suggest an endorsement of the politics of the SPLC or its leadership. Rather, it represents a recognition of the legitimacy of their research.


See Blair, ‘Looking clearly at right-wing terrorism’.

In the case of the Oklahoma City bombing, for instance, the immediate assumption in much of the media – and within the larger public – was that Muslim terrorists had carried out the action. When it was discovered that this was homegrown, white supremacist terror, the entire tone shifted. Suddenly there were efforts underway to explain what would lead this white man to do something so horrible. In the aftermath of any action attributed to Muslim terrorists nothing along the same or similar lines has been undertaken.

Berlet and Lyons, *Right-wing Populism in America*, pp. 347-8. They note that the first two tendencies seem to be common across borders while the third – the right-wing Christian evangelicals – is a very specific US phenomenon.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, for instance, sees them as one among many of the right-wing extremist tendencies.

Metaphorically, they enlisted in the ‘army’ of the southern elite, seeing in their white skin a uniform that identified them with the elite.


21 Historically it is important to recognize that secession has not solely been the battle cry of the Confederacy. In the early 1800s, a secessionist movement existed in New England. There was also the notorious alleged Aaron Burr conspiracy for secession in the lower segments of the Louisiana Purchase territory. Nevertheless, with the Civil War and its aftermath, secession as a movement has largely been associated with the political right and its latent sympathy for the CSA.


27 In its more extreme forms notions such as ZOG – the Zionist Occupation Government – to describe the USA as actually controlled by a Jewish cabal date back to the anti-Semitism of the nineteenth century.

28 The roots can be traced to the development in the 1920s of what came to be known as ‘national Bolshevism’, with which Karl Radek was associated. There are today, largely in Russia, political organizations that consider themselves ‘national Bolshevik’, allegedly combining variations of Russian nationalism with socialism. Despite the rhetoric, most such efforts had a fascist trajectory.

29 A very provocative point along these lines was raised in the British left magazine Red Pepper by Keiron Farrow in an article entitled ‘Anti-fascism isn’t working’, August 2009, available at http://www.redpepper.org.uk. This is not a tactical argument. There are certainly many tactical circumstances in which one may take a stand against right-wing populists in favor of a more establishment political force. But a strategic reliance on mainstream/elite political parties and politicians is a cul de sac.