

# THE POPULIST

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# PERSUASION

AN AMERICAN HISTORY

# MICHAEL KAZIN

# The Populist Persuasion

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AN AMERICAN HISTORY

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Michael Kazin



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*Designed by Ellen Levine*

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kazin, Michael, 1948—

The populist persuasion: an American history / Michael Kazin.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-465-03793-3 (cloth)

ISBN 0-465-05998-8 (paper)

1. Populism—United States—History. 2. United States—Politics and government—1865-1933. 3. United States—Politics and government—20th century. I. Title.

E661.K25 1994

973—dc20

94-29404

CIP

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96 97 98 99 ♦/HC 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

## Acknowledgments

A DECADE AGO, I began to write this book as a way of making sense of a painful experience: the decline of the American Left, including its liberal component, and the rise of the Right. Most of the people who helped me do it have agonized over the same question, although their answers often differ from mine.

I soon decided that the long course of populism was critical to the story. But to make sense of that history, I would have to learn about periods, worldviews, and movements about which I was largely ignorant. Fortunately, there were specialists in those subjects who were willing to talk about my ideas and critique my writing. For evangelical Protestantism, I relied on Tony Fels; for nineteenth-century politics, Roy Rosenzweig; for the American Federation of Labor, Julia Greene; for Father Coughlin's movement, Alan Brinkley; for the CIO, Nelson Lichtenstein; for both anti-communism and resurgent conservatism in the 1970s and 1980s, John Judis; for the New Left, Todd Gitlin; and for George Wallace and his campaigns, Tom Sugrue and Dan T. Carter. Thanks, as well, to the hundreds of scholars whose works I mined for purposes with which a number would undoubtedly disagree.

Along the way, I also got advice, clippings, and a few good lines from Eric Alterman, Robert Beisner, Leon Fink, Joshua Freeman, Sandy Horwitt, Stuart Kaufman, Timothy Meagher, Leo Ribuffo, Jules Tygiel, and Maurice Isserman, my partner in looking back on the grim and glorious 1960s. Long interviews with Heather Booth, Kevin Phillips, and Miles Rapoport cleared up the gnarled history of new populisms, right and left.

Two generous fellowships gave me time to work and the company of people who helped make that work a bit more enlightening. At the National Museum of

American History, Edith Mayo and Harry Rubenstein were indispensable. At the Commonwealth Center for the Study of American Culture down in Williamsburg, Virginia, Chandos Brown, Bob Gross, and Richard John offered excellent advice and recreation. Hard questions were also raised by the participants at graduate seminars at the University of Virginia and George Washington University, where I tried out my ideas. And course releases from American University, where I am blessed with wise and congenial departmental colleagues, gave me valuable time to think them through.

I also want to thank the wonderful staff people at the Library of Congress, where I did the bulk of my research in the elysian days when a stack pass was easy to come by. Bruce Martin was especially warm and helpful. The Library of Congress is a place where, amid esthetic splendor, one can spend days reading rare and fragile newsprint at a table shared by an Ivy League professor and a homeless man poring over the *Wall Street Journal*. Preserve the people's library!

I was incredibly lucky to have three of America's best historians spend many hours with my manuscript. Gary Gerstle read the unruly first draft and nudged me to recognize the significance of what I was trying to do. Alan Brinkley read a later draft and pointed out that a series of unconnected narratives does not make a satisfying work of history.

The third, Steve Fraser, my editor, deserves his own paragraph. Without his diligent craftsmanship, this would not be much of a book. Steve's steady encouragement, his historical and political wisdom, his acute feel for style and structure, and his sense of when and how to push an author enabled me to produce something coherent out of what was merely a grand whim. I can't believe there is a better editor of nonfiction in the United States.

At Basic Books, Justin McShea helped me track down obscure photos and drawings and kept the publication process going. Matthew Shine was a shrewd and helpful project editor, and Laura Leivick a precise and perceptive copy editor.

Finally, my family: my mother, Carol Bookman Salvadori, and my stepfather, Mario Salvadori, were immensely supportive and patient. My father, Alfred Kazin, worried with me and offered his sharp and loving advice. Neither of my children was born when I began this book. But now Danny can recognize the different species of bats and knows how many games the Orioles are out of first place. And Maia sings on key about friends, real and imaginary, and points out all the STOP signs. May they live in a far more decent world. And thanks to Jenny Lagos for playing with and caring for them in this one.

As for Beth Carrie Horowitz—physician, idea woman, copy editor, fiction fanatic, lover, and friend—I have to fall back on the immortal words of Ralph Kramden: Baby, you're the greatest.

*Washington, D.C., September 1994*

# Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ix
Introduction: Speaking for the People	1
1. Inheritance	9
2. The Righteous Commonwealth of the Late Nineteenth Century	27
3. Workers as Citizens: Labor and the Left in the Gompers Era	49
4. Onward, Christian Mothers and Soldiers: The Prohibitionist Crusade	79
5. Social Justice and Social Paranoia: The Catholic Populism of Father Coughlin	109
6. The Many and the Few: The CIO and the Embrace of Liberalism	135
7. A Free People Fight Back: The Rise and Fall of the Cold War Right	165
8. Power to Which People? The Tragedy of the White New Left	195
9. Stand Up for the Working Man: George Wallace and the Making of a New Right	221
10. The Conservative Capture: From Nixon to Reagan	245
11. Conclusion: Populisms of Decline	269
 A NOTE ON METHOD	 285
NOTES	287
GOOD READING	358
INDEX	365

# Introduction: Speaking for the People

*Who shall speak for the people?  
who has the answers?  
where is the sure interpreter?  
who knows what to say?*

—Carl Sandburg, *The People, Yes*, 1936

THIS book is about the persistence of one vital way in which Americans have argued about politics. From the birth of the United States to the present day, images of conflict between the powerful and the powerless have run through our civic life, filling it with discord and meaning. The haughty financier wraps chains of debt around small farmers who grow food and fibers for the nation. The stout industrialist—top hat on his fleshy head and diamond stickpin gleaming from his silk tie—clashes with the working man dressed in overalls or secondhand suit, his jaw firm and his muscles taut. The federal bureaucrat, overeducated and amoral, scoffs at the God-fearing nuclear family in its modest home, a crucifix on the wall and a flagpole in the yard. In every campaign season, scores of politicians—both liberal and conservative—vow to fight for “middle-class taxpayers” and against a variety of “bureaucrats,” “fat cats,” and “Big Men.”

Such images and countless others like them make up the language of populism. Whether orated, written, drawn, broadcast, or televised, this language is used by those who claim to speak for the vast majority of Americans who work hard and love their country. That is the most basic and telling definition of populism: a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter.<sup>1</sup>

Through the past two centuries, most movement activists and insurgent politicians have judged certain ordinary Americans to be more virtuous or, at least, more significant than others. Populist speakers typically expressed their highest esteem for citizens who inhabited what the novelist E. L. Doctorow calls “the large middle world, neither destitute nor privileged, . . . that of the ordinary working man”: yeo-

man farmers, urban craftsmen, native-born factory workers, home owners struggling to pay their taxes.<sup>2</sup>

White working men never exclusively composed this "people," but it was usually shaped in their image. Black activists had a standing quarrel with the categories at issue: for them, the elite was one to which the majority of white Americans belonged; their own people a minority whose special history and status threatened to break the mold.

Still, the language of populism in the United States expressed a kind of idealistic discontent that did not always obey demographic borders. Pitched battles between us and them often involved debates about the meaning of Americanism itself. Populist speakers in the United States voiced a profound outrage with elites who ignored, corrupted, and/or betrayed the core ideal of American democracy: rule by the common people who expected their fellow citizens to advance by diligence, practical intelligence, and a faith in God alone. There have, of course, been populisms in the history of other nations—movements and political figures that consistently expressed the belief that "virtue resides in the simple people, who are the overwhelming majority, and in their collective traditions."<sup>3</sup> But populism in the United States has made the unique claim that the powers that be are transgressing the nation's founding creed, which every permanent resident should honor. In this sense, American populism binds even as it divides.<sup>4</sup>

Resolution of this process has often been vicious and painful; violent accusations have a way of preceding or justifying repressive actions. But the fact that the political actors were fighting over a shared set of ideals helped Americans to avoid the terrors to body and mind that have characterized the hegemony of revolutionary ideologies in other nations: fascism, Nazism, Leninism, Maoism, and the type of Islam that currently rules Iran. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed during the childhood of the United States, Americans "are for ever varying, altering, and restoring secondary matters; but they carefully abstain from touching what is fundamental. They love change, but they dread revolutions."<sup>5</sup>

Through populism, Americans have been able to protest social and economic inequalities without calling the entire system into question. Class barriers, according to the national creed, are not supposed to exist in the United States. To maintain that most citizens—whatever their occupation or income—are moral, hardworking people denies the rigorous categories of Marxism and the condescension of the traditional Right. Believing that mass democracy can topple any haughty foe means avoiding gloomy thoughts about entrenched structures of capital and the state that often frustrate the most determined movement. Populism is thus a grand form of rhetorical optimism; once mobilized, there is nothing ordinary Americans cannot accomplish.

But what has been the consequence of these flag-waving rebellions? To appreciate the tenacity of a populist persuasion from the era of Thomas Jefferson to the era of William Jefferson Clinton is no revelation. What matters is that, within a durable frame, the language evolved; when historical actors argued about Americanism and



redefined the people and their adversaries, they helped to strengthen certain political forces and to debilitate others.

The first chapter of this book explores the antebellum heritage upon which subsequent movements have drawn. Each succeeding chapter is devoted to a different, prolonged attempt to channel the vision of mass democracy and resentment against its enemies into greater power for specific social groups, usually dominated by whites, and the individuals who sought to represent them. In sequence, I profile the antimonopoly coalition that organized the People's Party; the labor and socialist movements of the Progressive era; the prohibitionists who surged to victory during the same period; Father Charles Coughlin and his largely Catholic following during the Great Depression; the industrial labor movement allied with the New Deal; conservative anti-Communists during the early Cold War; the white New Left of the 1960s; George Wallace and the white backlash phenomenon, and the new conservatism expressed by Richard Nixon, the Christian Right, and Ronald Reagan. I conclude with reflections on how Democrats like Bill Clinton and Jesse Jackson, and independents like Ross Perot, have addressed fears of a nation in eclipse.

The populist label is not normally affixed to some of these individuals and movements. And I omit certain figures, like Huey Long and Upton Sinclair, who are often called populist. My choice was not capricious. All the forces included had a nationwide impact and presence lasting at least a decade.<sup>6</sup> Each played a major role in one or more of the central dramas of American politics in the twentieth century: progressive reform, the Depression, the New Deal, the two world wars, the Cold War and the Vietnam conflict, the black freedom struggle, feminism, and the rise of a new conservatism.

I do not contend that my subjects *were* populists, in the way they were unionists or socialists, Protestants or Catholics, liberal Democrats or conservative Republicans. Populism, more an impulse than an ideology, is too elastic and promiscuous to be the basis for such an allegiance. Rather, my premise is that all these people employed populism as a flexible mode of persuasion. They used traditional kinds of expressions, tropes, themes, and images to convince large numbers of Americans to join their side or to endorse their views on particular issues.

The history of the populist persuasion is complex and full of ironies and contradictions; there is nothing tidy or predictable about the rhetoric of American discontents. But one can glimpse some patterns. I see two vital transitions in the way that politically active Americans have utilized the language.

The first occurred in the wake of the defeat of the People's Party—the original Populists—in the mid-1890s. Through the language of these rebels, who were based among small farmers, flowed two powerful, inherited streams of grassroots rhetoric. First was the moral revivalism of plebeian preachers and lay campaigners against slavery and strong drink; second was a spirited defense of “producers”—both rural and urban, wage earners and the self-employed—upon whose labor and loyalty the Republic depended.

In the early twentieth century, there was a parting of the ways. During the Progressive era, small farmers ceased to have the enthusiasm or the numbers to lead a national insurgency. But two other groups with dissimilar goals did: wage earners and evangelical churchgoers. A rising labor movement, including many socialists, articulated a narrowed version of the ethic that linked political virtue with manual work. It was now unions, they argued, that best represented the "average man." And a religious vocabulary had to be avoided, lest it divide labor's heterogeneous ranks. At the same time, middle-class Protestant women and ministers were mounting a righteous crusade against "the liquor trust," inevitably clashing with workers and immigrants who had no animus against the saloon.

Mutual suspicion thus estranged a movement originating in the church from one whose lifeblood was the industrial workplace. Since then, the gap between those who see ordinary Americans primarily in economic terms and those who view the people as belonging to God has never really closed. And it continues to divide populist persuaders today. Activists who blame an immoral, agnostic media for America's problems have little in common with those who indict corporations for moving jobs overseas.

The second transition helped propel a major alteration in national politics. In the late 1940s, populism began a migration from Left to Right. The rhetoric once spoken primarily by reformers and radicals (debt-ridden farmers, craft and industrial unionists, socialists attempting to make their purposes sound American, even prohibitionists eager to wipe out the saloon interests) was creatively altered by conservative groups and politicians (zealous anti-Communists, George Wallace, the Christian Right, and the campaigns and presidential administrations of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan).

It was a remarkable shift. The vocabulary of grassroots rebellion now served to thwart and reverse social and cultural change rather than to promote it. This turn-about can be linked to factors tangential to the movements themselves: the onset of the Cold War, the rise of a liberal state whose policies seemed to contradict its majoritarian rhetoric, the fact that most white Americans came to regard themselves as middle-class consumers and taxpayers, and the booming growth of evangelical churches whose political leanings were as conservative as their theology.

But liberals and radicals had opened the door for the Right. After World War II, the broad Left that had built the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and the Popular Front and campaigned for Franklin D. Roosevelt imploded and lost much of its insurgent spirit. Industrial unionists safeguarded their hard-won gains, Communists and their allies became preoccupied with self-defense, and liberal politicians and intellectuals took for granted the reforms of the New Deal—and the expanded, bureaucratic state that administered them—and fretted about Cold War hysteria.

Into this breach emerged, gradually and unevenly, a conservative populism that pledged to defend pious, middle-class communities against the amoral governing elite. Father Coughlin had experimented with such rhetoric in the 1930s, and the American Right began talking this way during the red scare of the late 1940s and

1950s. But conservatives didn't fully grasp its electoral potential until the domestic wars of the 1960s.

Instruction came from George Wallace and lesser-known tribunes of the white backlash. They demonstrated how to appeal to millions of former Democrats—Southern Protestants and Northern Catholics, most of them wage earners—with attacks on treasonous college kids, pro-busing judges, and politicians who, it was charged, took the people's money and wasted it on lazy minorities. The vengeful militance had a racial undercurrent that never lay far from the surface.

The New Left countered with a bold principle: the black freedom struggle should be the model for all discontented Americans. The solution to the nation's ills was the kind of direct democracy the civil rights movement was practicing in the South. Inspired by both black activists and the revolutionaries of Vietnam, most young radicals gradually replaced the "large middle world" with the Third World as the repository of political virtue. The need to build a new interracial majority was largely forgotten.

For liberal Democrats, too, the black movement took center stage in the fight for reform, a place once occupied by the struggles of farmers and wage earners (most from European roots). But liberals were yoked to a regime whose credibility and finances were running low. Unhindered by Wallace's belligerent methods, Republican conservatives leaped in to claim the taxpayers, home owners, and avid churchgoers of the great white middle.

By the 1990s, the old talk of manual "producers" versus corporate "parasites" sounded hopelessly archaic, and fragmented movements on the Left, their very definition in dispute, had found nothing compelling to take its place. Despite the results of the 1992 election, the Right's conception of a "Middle America" beset by a spendthrift, immoral political elite remained vigorous. It limited what President Bill Clinton or any other progressive leader or organization could accomplish.

My definition of populism as a persistent yet mutable style of political rhetoric with roots deep in the nineteenth century differs from two other conceptions of the term that are widely heard in late-twentieth-century America. The first, upheld by several of my fellow historians, restricts application of the term to the mass movement that arose in the 1880s among farmers in the South and Great Plains, and then crested and crashed during the crisis of the 1890s. This is the upsurge that gave Populism its name, and it deserves to be the only one graced with a capital *P*.<sup>7</sup> The second is a glib habit indulged in by many journalists, and even some advertisers eager to capture the volatile tastes of the public. The habit of branding as "populist" everything from Bruce Springsteen to Rush Limbaugh to loose-fitting cotton trousers also has a history, which I discuss in the final chapter.

While preferring to let my narrative do the talking, I should make clear why neither of these definitions seems satisfactory. To call populist only the People's Party and its immediate antecedents is to neglect the potent tradition to which insurgents in the late nineteenth century added their own blend of economic dread and mis-

sionary zeal. It also leads to ahistorical debates about who is or is not a true populist, debates that are just an indirect way of announcing one's political opinions.

By contrast, the cultural mode makes no useful discriminations at all. To pin the populist label on anything or anybody not associated with the glamorous and the wealthy substitutes faddishness for interpretation. For coherency, and to keep faith with the origin of the term, the political should remain central to its meaning. My own concern is with some of the men and women who articulated their collective grievances and their optimistic visions in populist ways. Populism, of course, was not the sole element in their rhetoric, but its significance is, I think, impossible to deny.<sup>8</sup>

It may seem strange to read a study of populism that seldom pauses to examine the language of the common people themselves, the anonymous millions whose words and pictures are rarely preserved but whose labor is present everywhere. But to do justice to that topic, over the span of two hundred years, would have been impossible—at least for me. So I chose to follow my abiding fascination with mass movements and prominent figures who sought to speak *for* the people instead of to attempt what, by necessity, would have been an anecdotal, scattershot presentation of what ordinary, nonactivist Americans were saying.

I do, however, speculate about how certain forms of expression were received and what impact they may have had on the course of political change. Where possible, these speculations are supported by evidence—from secondary works, opinion polls, election results, and the like. But I confess to making some leaps of judgment based on nothing more than an accumulated knowledge of the American past, on my sense of how political speech meshed with popular attitudes at different historical junctures. In the end, this study can, at best, capture but one aspect of a grand and elusive subject: how Americans perceived the sources of justice and injustice in their society and acted upon those views.

As readers will discover, my own sentiments about the populist persuasion are firmly equivocal. I cherish the traditional convictions of the non-Communist Left; my ideal society would be one that enhanced and protected interracial democracy, civil liberties, and the right of all its citizens to labor creatively and to live in decency.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, only a few times in American history—notably the era of the New Deal and World War II—has populist rhetoric worked to further those ends. Especially since 1945, appeals to “the people” have more commonly promoted detestable views—fear of the black and immigrant poor, a belief in conspiracies, loyalty to America and to God used as a club to beat one's rivals. In their respective heydays, Joseph McCarthy, George Wallace, and Ronald Reagan appealed as effectively to white working people as did anyone on the democratic Left. I agree with the philosopher Jurgen Habermas: “We must realize that all traditions are ambivalent and that it is therefore necessary to be critical about all of them so as to be able to decide which tradition to maintain and which not.”<sup>10</sup>

But the contest should not be abandoned. It is only when leftists and liberals themselves talked in populist ways—hopeful, expansive, even romantic—that they

were able to lend their politics a majoritarian cast and help markedly to improve the common welfare. Faith in the abilities of ordinary Americans of all races to run their society need not be blind to the logical pitfalls and mythic nature of populist appeals. It must, however, be a sincere faith—one that, I confess, does not always come easily to a Jew raised in a comfortable home who makes his living at a university. Emerson once counseled, "March without the people, and you march into the night."<sup>11</sup> Cursing the darkness only delays the dawn.



"The Downfall of Mother Bank": President Andrew Jackson routs Nicholas Biddle, president of the Bank of the United States, and his journalistic lackeys, c. 1833. (Courtesy of the Collection of the New-York Historical Society)

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## Chapter 1

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# Inheritance

*Experience proves, that the very men whom you entrust with the support and defense of your most sacred liberties, are frequently corrupt, not only in England but also in the colonies. . . . If ever therefore your rights are preserved, it must be through the virtue and integrity of the middling sort, as farmers, tradesmen, & c. who despise venality, and best know the sweets of liberty.*

—“Publius,” spokesman for Philadelphia artisans, 1772

*The sickly, weakly, timid man, fears the people, and is a Tory by nature. The healthy, strong and bold, cherishes them, is formed a Whig by nature.*

—Thomas Jefferson, letter to Lafayette, 1823

*I hold that if the Almighty had ever made a set of men that should do all the eating and none of the work, He would have made them with mouths only and no hands; and if He had ever made another class that He intended should do all the work and no eating, He would have made them with hands only and no mouths.*

—Abraham Lincoln, 1859

## RHETORIC FOR AMERICANS

**I**N 1892, Georgia Populist leader Tom Watson wrote a brief synopsis of American history intended for use in that fall's election campaign. Like any good patriot, he began with the Revolution: “Those who wished to revolt against the unjust Laws of the Mother Country were called Whigs.” Then Watson detailed how long and tragic the struggle between the people and their enemies had been. He praised the framers of the Constitution as “brave men,” while acknowledging they had superseded the instructions of the state legislators who sent them to Philadelphia in 1787. “Naturally, furious divisions arose” between Federalists and anti-Federalists. But the Constitution, implied Watson, was sensible and just, and it soon became “the Supreme Law under which we now live.”

Only then was the battle joined. Alexander Hamilton and his followers stood up for "a strong centralized Govt." as the instrument of "a moneyed aristocracy supported by special privilege," which Watson also called "the System." According to Watson, Jefferson and his disciples (Andrew Jackson most prominent, and heroic, among them) successfully opposed this order in the name of both "individual enterprise" and "the will of the people." For a few years, the new Republican Party, at the behest of principled abolitionists, also represented "a great popular impulse." But, by the end of the Civil War, corrupt men, wielding great amounts of ill-gotten wealth, had taken control of both major parties. This "modern system of piracy" was, jeered Watson, an "improvement" over "the crude methods" of highway robbers. Now, the thieves were so dominant that "the booty is great and the risk is nought."

A former (and future) Democrat, Watson predictably scorned the Republican Party's obeisance to "Boodlers, Monopolists, Gamblers, Gigantic Corporations, Bondholders, Bankers." What, he implied, could one expect of an organization that openly admitted its support of Hamiltonian principles? But the Georgian reserved his sharpest barbs for those who were perverting the Democratic Party, created to ensure that the people would always rule. "Did [Jefferson] dream that in 100 years or less *his* party would be prostituted to the vilest purposes of monopoly; that red-eyed Jewish millionaires would be chiefs of that Party, and that the liberty and prosperity of the country would be . . . constantly and corruptly sacrificed to Plutocratic greed in the name of Jeffersonian Democracy?"<sup>1</sup>

Watson's vigorous polemic is cast in a familiar style of American rhetoric. Only the taint of anti-Semitism (which did not become central to his worldview until after the demise of the People's Party) distinguishes his tale from the appeals of political actors before and since who claimed to be defending the virtuous majority against its greedy, elitist foes.

But attention should be paid to familiarity. Beneath the stark dualism of Watson's history lesson ran a powerful and persistent tradition in the public language of discontented citizens. That tradition began to emerge in the Revolutionary era and became ubiquitous during the 1830s and 1840s, the Age of the Common Man—at least in popular idiom. For Watson and his comrades in the People's Party, this was a political and social Golden Age to which, in spirit, they wished to return. To understand the nature and persistence of populist language, one must return to its sources—the inheritance of most Americans who tried to speak for the people in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The embryonic populist rhetoric of antebellum America incorporated two different but not exclusive strains of vision and protest. First, there was the pietistic impulse issuing from the Protestant Reformation and continually revived by "great awakenings" that featured vivid emotional oratory, camp meetings, and the creation of new churches—all fueled by the belief in a personal God unmediated through spiritual authority. If "ALL if they choose, May enjoy the GOOD NEWS," as one evangelical writer put it in 1809, then it was every Christian's duty to attack sinful



behavior, especially when it received encouragement and sanction from the rich and haughty.<sup>2</sup>

The second source was the secular faith of the Enlightenment, the belief that ordinary people could think and act rationally, more rationally, in fact, than their ancestral overlords. In the hands of a Thomas Jefferson or a Tom Paine, this belief was revolutionary. "Truths" about the "absolute Despotism" of King George III were "self-evident," claimed the Declaration of Independence; freed from the shackles of "ancient prejudices" and "superstition," Americans, wrote Paine that same year, saw clearly that the Crown, like all monarchies, was but an elaborate figleaf for arbitrary, self-aggrandizing rule. Paine, an erstwhile artisan, conveyed the devastating limpidity of his arguments by entitling his pamphlet *Common Sense*.<sup>3</sup>

Through the nineteenth century, the pietist and the rationalist coexisted in rhetoric, party politics, and coalitions of the discontented. Protestant Christianity, as a belief system, was common to both groups, although the forms of worship differed widely. Plebeian preachers and secular propagandists agreed, as one historian puts it, "that people should shake off all servile prejudice and learn to prove things for themselves."<sup>4</sup>

From the turn of the century to the 1830s, the democratic wave crested for both groups simultaneously. Caucasian men won universal suffrage, and working people of both sexes organized the first trade unions at the same time that evangelicals of different classes were filling thousands of new churches (Methodist, Baptist, Mormon) whose numbers dwarfed those of the older, more hierarchical denominations. The sensationalistic "penny press," read widely by plebeian audiences, mushroomed alongside Christian associations dedicated to charity, temperance, abolishing slavery, and spreading the Gospel. Charles Grandison Finney, the foremost "great awakener" in the industrializing North, was fond of comparing the conversion experience to voting for the Lord and against the Devil.<sup>5</sup>

Religious fervor, as Tocqueville recognized, was "perpetually warmed in the United States by the fires of patriotism." Circuit-riding preachers and union-organizing artisans (even the Painite freethinkers among them) agreed that high-handed rule by the wealthy was both sinful and unrepugnant. All believed in the nation's millennial promise, its role as a beacon of liberty in a benighted world. "Vox populi, vox dei" worked in either direction.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, evangelical and rationalist democrats drew from a common storehouse of imperishable linguistic goods. In parallel ways, they articulated four clusters of beliefs: about Americanism, the people, elites, and the need for mass movements. These constituted the primal grammar on which the People's Party and all subsequent American populisms would depend. Both groups constructed this grammar through what the historian Kenneth Cmiel calls "the middling rhetoric"—a marriage of bombast with informality, the bluntness of a Tom Paine with the sentimentality of a Harriet Beecher Stowe.<sup>7</sup>

There were differences of emphasis and meaning, of course. The pietists insisted