December 1996

*The Populist Persuasion.* Michael Kazin.

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Populism is a powerful ideological force in American culture. Although narrow definitions treat populism as a political style, it is far more embracing. It pervades American politics, culture and history and resonates with ordinary Americans to an extraordinary degree. As the term’s latin root reveals, it is a focus on the people, and a concern with their beliefs, attitudes and values that gives populism its distinctive character. Since the notion of the people is so fundamental to an understanding of American society, a proper appreciation of populism is an essential requirement for anyone wanting to know what makes America work.

Kazin’s readable history of populism in the United States is one of the best to date. While other works on the subject have focused on particular periods of American history, such as the late 19th century when the People’s Party was on the ascendency, Kazin traces the influence of populism from the 19th century up to the present time. His account of how populist ideas have inspired quite different political movements during the last century is particularly interesting. Populism, he demonstrates, not only represented the agrarian interests of small farmers who supported the People’s Party, but characterized the activities of the labor movement during the Gompers era, inspired prohibitionists during the 1920s, and fueled racism in the South after the Second World War. Kazin also shows how populist ideas pervaded the new left anti-war movement in the 1960s. Despite the left’s self-declared claim to socialist radicalism, Kazin reveals its commitment to populism. It is perhaps the ideological versatility of populism and its ability to inspire people of quite different beliefs that it is the most significant contribution of the book.

This is a important book which should be widely consulted by anyone who is interested in American politics. There are omissions, such as a lack of a detailed discussion of the Johnson administration’s War on Poverty, which was essentially populist in character. Nevertheless, the book is comprehensive and highly informative.