

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

DECEMBER 21, 2018

by PAUL STREET
24.12.2018

Two Populisms, Not One

Left v. Right Populism

Two very different “populisms” that have arisen in response to neoliberal capitalism in the West.

A left-leaning social-democratic “progressive populism” targets the capitalist concentration of wealth and power and the unbridled pursuit of private profit as enemies of the people and the common good. This populism is egalitarian and radically democratic. It tends towards socialism. Its attractive policy agenda, supported by working-class majorities, includes the downward distribution of wealth, the expansion of the social safety net, university quality health care, increased minimum wages and union power, public jobs programs, and the protection of livable ecology (a Green New Deal). Its diverse political figureheads include Jeremy Corbyn (leader of the British Labour Party), Jean-Luc Melenchon (head of La France Insoumie), Yanis Varoufakis (leader of the new Progressive International), and even Bernie Sanders.

Then there’s the reactionary anti-cosmopolitan nationalist “populism” of the right. This unattractive and backwards-looking populism shares some of left populism’s disdain for giant globalist corporations and financial institutions. Still, its ire is aimed primarily at immigrants and racial and ethnic minorities and their perceived liberal and multi-cultural champions in the globalist “elite.” This white-nationalist “populism” (some would say faux-populism) carries no small whiff of fascism. It aligns with noxious politicians like Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen (France), Alexander Gauland (Germany), Matteo Salvini

(Italy), Nigel Farage (England), Viktor Orban (Hungary), Geert Wilders (Netherlands), and Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil).

The Ruling Class Prefers the Right-Wing Version

So which of these two populisms – the progressive populism of the left and the reactionary “populism” of the right – does the corporate and financial ruling class prefer? The right-wing one, of course.

There’s no mystery about why. The starboard strain offers no serious challenge to capitalist prerogatives. It works to exacerbate internal working-class divisions and to divert majority Caucasian anger away from those who possess real material and social power – the top capitalist stratum and its professional and political class servants – on to far less powerful scapegoats: immigrants, Muslims, Blacks, and Latinx people. Right-wing populism’s anger at the capitalist “elite” is largely for show. Its real fury is directed at absurdly demonized racial, national, ethnic, religious, cultural, and sexual “others.”

Left wing populism’s anger at the bourgeois masters is for real. The authentic populism of the portside seeks to overcome racial, ethnic, national, sexual and other social divisions to build working-class and popular solidarity for the common good and against the wealthy Few and their professional and managerial cadres atop the commanding heights of capitalism.

Sanders Trumped on Cable News (2015-16)

That’s why ruling-class-owned corporate media tends to give immigrant- and minority-bashing reactionary populism considerably more attention than it does left-leaning progressive populism. It’s why Sanders’ giant progressive-populist rallies were relatively invisible compared to Trump’s widely covered white-nationalist rallies on U.S. cable news in 2015 and 2016.

The plutocracy-skewering Sanders campaign almost unseated the ruling class’s preferred candidate Hillary Clinton with essentially no business support– no small feat in the United States’ money-soaked political process. You’d hardly have known this, however, from the dominant media coverage, which vastly downplayed the Sanders challenge even as it obsessed over every little Trump Tweet and snarl. It was “down the memory hole” (Orwell) with the highly civilized and avowedly Scandinavia-inspired, social-democratish Sanders phenomenon even as it happened. The Terrible Trump, whose brutal gatherings evoked memories of Nazi rallies in 1930s Germany, was, by contrast, the “authentic” and “populist” story on CNN.

“More Occupy Than Orban”

Another and related way in which ruling class media channels its sheer elitist contempt for left (actual) progressive-populism is by failing to distinguish it from noxious reactionary populism and indeed merging it with the backward-looking variant. Listen to an interesting statement from last week from the editorial board of the New York Times regarding the extraordinary working-class, egalitarian, and anti-capitalist Gilets Jaunes (“Yellow Vests”) uprising that has roiled France with large majority support in recent weeks. “The Yellow Vests on the Champs-Élysées,” the Times editors intoned, “are cousins of the British who voted for Brexit, the Americans who voted for Donald Trump, and the Poles, Hungarians and Italians who elected populist, anti-democratic governments” (Editors, “Macron Blinks,” NYT, Dec. 11, 2018).

The Times’ editors’ falsely merged the Yellow Vests with European, American, and British right-nationalist populism. They did so in defiance of their own paper’s reporting from the streets of France. As Times correspondent Adam Nossiter reported in early December:

“The Yellow Vests, who have thrown France into turmoil with violent protests in recent weeks, say they want more, and they want it sooner rather than later — lower taxes, higher salaries, freedom from gnawing financial fear, and a better life...Those deeper demands, the government’s inability to keep up, and fierce resentment of prosperous and successful cities run like an electrified wire connecting populist uprisings in the West, including in Britain, Italy, the United States and, to a lesser extent, Central Europe.”

“What ties these uprisings together, beyond the demands, is a rejection of existing parties, unions and government institutions that are seen as incapable of channeling the depth of their grievances or of offering a bulwark against economic insecurity...But what makes France’s revolt different is that it has not followed the usual [reactionary-] populist playbook. It is not tethered to a political party, let alone to a right-wing one. It is not focusing on race or migration, and those issues do not appear on the Yellow Vests’ list of complaints. It is not led by a single fire-breathing leader. Nationalism is not on the agenda.”

“The uprising is instead mostly organic, spontaneous and self-determined. It is mostly about economic class. It is about the inability to pay the bills. In that regard, it is more Occupy than Orban — more akin to the protests against Wall Street driven by the working poor in the United States than the race-based, flag-waving of Hungary’s increasingly authoritarian leader, Viktor Orban...In Paris, it was the luxury shopping streets, the Avenue Kleber and the Rue de Rivoli — insolent symbols of urban

privilege compared with the drab provinces from which the Yellow Vests emerged — where windows were smashed on Saturday” (emphasis added).

The Times reporter on the ground in France (unlike the Times editorial board in Manhattan) got it right (left): The Yellow Vests are to the anti-neoliberal but non-nationalist and working-class left of the right-wing “populists” of the U.S., UK, Italy, Poland, and Hungary. The street-fighters of France trashed bourgeois and capitalist symbols and property, not immigrants or minorities. As Gilbert Mercier noted two weeks ago:

“...the Gilets Jaunes movement is anti-capitalist: a guttural revolt of the have-nots against the elite. It is a popular, not a populist, movement. Europeans and even American populist-nationalists are already distorting the Gilets Jaunes’ significance to serve their political agenda. As opposed to the rise of nationalism-populism elsewhere, such as in Italy, Austria, Hungary, the UK as expressed by BREXIT, the US, and Brazil with the election of Bolsonaro, the Gilets Jaunes do not have an anti-immigration or even an anti-EU agenda that reeks of racism and **neofascism**... The Gilets Jaunes are in revolt against capitalism or neoliberalism, which is a worldwide system of concentration of wealth and power into a few hands.”

(Note how Mercier felt the need to distinguish the Gilets Jaunes from “populism” even though the movement is arguably left-populist. That’s because Western media-politics culture has given the term “populism” to the right).

But so what? As dutiful neoliberal servants of the American and global bourgeoisie, the Times editorial board finds it useful to merge the real, popular, and social-democratic populism of the left with the unpopular, racist, authoritarian, nationalist, xenophobic, and creeping fascist populism of the right.

“The Anti-Populist”

The leading Democratic-presidential hopeful Joe Biden has declared himself the (get-this) “Anti-Populist.” He makes no distinction, of course, between the leftish populism of Sanders and the virulent white-nationalist “populism” of Trump and his party. This is a clever corporate-neoliberal way of marginalizing the progressive-populist flank in U.S. major party politics and presenting the centrist Goldman Sachs-Citigroup-Council on Foreign Relations-establishment agenda (represented by Biden and/or perhaps the more dashing Beto O’Rourke atop the Democratic Party ticket in 2020) as the safe, reasonable alternative to the dangerous “rabble” and “mob” – the wretched commoners, who need to be managed by far-seeing and benevolent masters.

Bill Blum v. The New York Times – and Bernie Sanders

In another example of how the Times likes to stick knives in Left backs, the paper marked the death of the wonderful anti-U.S.-imperialist author and activist by publishing an insufferably condescending obituary that not-so subtly linked Blum to Osama bin-Laden while failing to relate anything of real substance about Blum's learned and widely-read reflections on U.S. "foreign policy" (also known as American imperialism). I met Bill Blum on at least two occasions. He was a kind and gentle man who exhibited none of the "rage" the Times claimed to see in his writings. It's a shame that Blum's writings haven't been taken more seriously by progressive-populists like Bernie Sanders, who seems unwilling to either understand or to acknowledge any understanding [1] that (as Dr. Martin Luther King said more than once near the end of this life) we cannot pay for social democracy while spending the lion's share of our tax dollars on the spiritually cancerous maintenance of a giant and mass-murderous war machine. How many times did the "democratic socialist" candidate Sanders cite Denmark, Norway, and Sweden as his social-democratic policy role models without having the decency to note that these nations spend comparatively tiny portions of their national budgets on their militaries?

Endnote

1) Lefties like to quote this aphorism from Upton Sinclair: "It Is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding It." In my experience within the intellectual and professional classes, the bigger problem has been how the salary prevents men and women from saying publicly what they privately understand to be true.