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Johnson, Paul Elliott: I the People. The Rhetoric of Conservative Populism in the United States, 336 pp., UAP, Tuscaloosa, AL 2022.

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Paul Elliott Johnson has written a topical book on a subject that we Europeans watch with morbid fascination: American conservative populism from Ronald Reagan to Donald Trump. The book not only confirms but even exceeds our progressive prejudices and our worst fears. The devastating thing about these fears is the sense of futility that accompanies them because, it turns out, progressive America already has all the right answers. If only conservatism was not there, then everything would be okay (p. 122).

In Johnson's telling, it follows that conservative populism must be completely defeated and replaced by progressivism (pp. 231–233). Conservative populism is an antidemocratic movement that posits a uniform 'people' based on a white and male individualist ideology. Conservative populists, the author tells us, are "possessed" by the desire of the "white man to be a part of society and to rule it" (p. 102).

The book relies on a long list of theories to support this argument (I counted semiotics, media studies, queer theory, communications theory, psychoanalysis, populism studies, literary theory, and theories of Blackness). But it does leave out an important one: ideology studies. And the study of ideology suggests, firstly, that ideologies emerge from specific experiences and socio-economic contexts and, secondly, that conservatism "mirrors" its progressive opponents (Michael Freeden: Ideologies and Political Theory, 1996, p. 336). Without a sense of the socio-experiential context, we do not know whether the postulated autonomous individuals of the conservative 'people' are a distinct feature of conservative populism or a broader feature of technological postmodern American society. Without a sense of the ideology that conservative populism is mirroring, we do not know whether conservatism merely

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reflects the individualist identity of progressive ideologies, as progressives from Richard Rorty (1998) to Mark Lilla (2018) point out. If either is the case, blaming conservative populism may be beside the point.

The result is a great muddying of the hermeneutical waters. Conservatives resort to scapegoating minorities and federal bureaucrats, we are told, because they are unable to put forward an idea of the common good (p. 3). But do not Mr. Johnson's conservatives fulfil the same scapegoating function in *his* narrative? Were it not for *them*, America would have freed itself from "whiteness", reckoned with capitalism, taken the "multiracial democratic medicine" (p. 151) of progressive politics and been cured. Perhaps, resentment powers not only conservative populism, as the book convincingly demonstrates, but also the progressive narratives that oppose it.

The book is at its best in its close readings of key conservative speeches and events, like Ronald Reagan's "A Time for Choosing" (1964), Newt Gingrich's inaugural address to the 104th Congress (1995), Rick Santelli's Tea Party rant (2009), and Donald Trump's first presidential campaign (2016). The analysis of Reagan's 1984 reelection campaign in chapter 2 is among the better parts of the book, and the conclusions on his vision of America, his utilisation of the anxieties of postindustrial society for his own political ends, or Gingrich's redundance to the very movement that he himself helped shift to the centre of American politics are convincing.

However, Johnson's reliance on theoretical abstractions makes the book difficult to follow. Terms like "ideographs," "libidinal economy," "emotional economy," "linguistic economy," "racial political economy," "Blackness=death," "liberal grammars" (or, at times, "discourses"), "biopolitics," "Foucauldian governmentality," "racial liberalism," and "double sovereignty" clutter the narrative and confound the argument. By insisting on a stark black-and-white world view, the book mirrors the political story of contemporary America as its target escalates from conservative populism to white Americans, American society in general, political liberalism, Western political thought, and ultimately "Western subjects" (p. 109). "American existence," we read, "is premised on the capacity for America to repeatedly prove to itself that Blackness and life are segregated from one another" (p. 11). The whole of American life, politics, and culture is reduced to the sheer terror of the political.

"I the People" is an artifact of the very culture war it seeks to explain. Its theoretical abstractions obscure rather than illuminate the realities of American conservatism, and its narrative is more likely to reinforce biases than foster understanding. And as such, it acts as a corroding agent to the very act of democratic faith that the rules apply even when you lose, which underlies even the most minimalist conception of democracy.

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