

Book Review

A New American Creed: The Eclipse of Citizenship and Rise of Populism

By David H. Kamens

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A rapidly burgeoning literature on populism roots the election of Donald Trump in three primary developments: skyrocketing economic inequality coupled with the hollowing out of the American welfare state; a crisis of political representation beginning in the late 1970s; and cultural resentment over the increasing diversification of the country's population. But in *A New American Creed: The Eclipse of Citizenship and the Rise of Populism*, David Kamens wants to locate populist resurgence in longer-term cultural and institutional changes. He argues that populism's return should be explained with reference to people's embeddedness in a particular institutionalized narrative of political culture: classic individualism.

Following Seymour Martin Lipset, Kamens views the United States as an exceptional case. He borrows his predecessor's term "American creed" to capture this radical individualism, which he insists is of distinctly American vintage. In the book's second chapter, he previews his argument, detailing the demise of citizenship as a civic religion in the waning years of the Cold War. With the disappearance of this collective identity and no viable alternatives on offer, the American creed was free to develop. In Chapter 3, he argues that in addition to the American creed, what makes the United States exceptional is that its state is embedded in society. I found this formulation a bit confusing given that in a Polanyian idiom, this concept approximates the opposite of what Kamens means by it: unlike European states, he argues, the American state is diffuse, localized, and dependent upon immediate plebiscitary sentiment.

In Chapter 4, he continues his account of American exceptionalism, pointing out that unlike Europe, the United States had nothing like a welfare state until the New Deal. This moment signaled a key shift toward the development of an "activist state." This state, as Kamens argues in Chapter 5, is not only itself activist insofar as it intervenes in society, but it creates activists: "a powerful narrative, opportunity structure, and incentive for social movement groups to form and succeed" (96). But this period was itself exceptional, he points out in Chapter 6. The "reemergence of prosperity and ideologies like neoliberalism"

(115) led to the revival of a specifically American brand of individualism. Following Robert Putnam, he argues that Americans now bowl alone. Local communities and political parties are things of the past, and citizenship is no longer about civic participation or consciousness. In its place stands the cult of the individual.

But if the postwar American state produced such prosperity, why was the collectivist moment so short-lived? In Chapter 7, Kamens explains that even in its Fordist-Keynesian iteration, there were never many universal programs managed by the federal government. Rather, welfare functions were articulated as “benefits” and citizens as “clients.” By the 1970s, this became unsustainable. As detailed in Chapter 8, “A culture war broke out, essentially between the anti-1960s faction of society and the pro-1960s faction” (158). Americans were driven by two central conflicts: the regulation of morality and the regulation of the economy. By the 1980s, these antagonisms produced a veritable legitimacy crisis, opening space for the ascension of populist movements.

In Chapter 9, Kamens accounts for the populism that has come to fill this void. The “enhanced individualism” of the American creed “has transferred charisma to individuals. The individual is now the key construct of American society” (177). At this point, the book becomes somewhat disappointing. In Chapter 10, he laments the demise of patriotism and includes odd sentences like, “Plural identities, such as African American, have become common and are widely accepted as legitimate” (221). Or in one of the chapter’s final lines, he bemoans that “hooking up” is now acceptable (222). By the time he concludes in Chapter 11, the book’s argument is no longer clear.

This is a major shortcoming of the book. If it begins as an attempt to explain the rise of populism, as in the book’s subtitle, the causal sequence remains muddled throughout, and this is for three reasons. First, Kamens never defines his explanandum. His populists include Joseph McCarthy, Ross Perot, and even uncharismatic figures like George H. W. Bush. If at times the book purports to explain the rise of Trump, at others it dates the current populist wave not in years but in decades (e.g., 177), or even to the 1960s (131). And how should we identify a populist when we see one? Again, this is never specified. Kamens manages to evade the entirety of the growing populist literature with the sole exception of John Judis’ popular book. As such, it is never clear with whom he is in dialogue. The bulk of his key references are to neoconservative social scientists from more than a half century ago, including Edward Banfield, Daniel Bell, and Morris Janowitz.

Second, it is never clear why Kamens focuses exclusively on the United States. In the book’s first chapter, he approvingly cites John Meyer and argues for the supplanting of nation states by a “larger global society” (5). He insists upon locating “the cause of these changes in a much wider, global context” (12). And he is right to do so: as he points out, “populism has risen in democracies across the world” (177). This is where Kamens’ explanation is least convincing. If populist regimes have emerged across much of Asia, Europe, and Latin America in recent years, why does he focus on a uniquely American explanation?

Finally, it was very difficult for me to pinpoint the causal mechanisms in Kamens' story. He frequently allows ideas to unfold as historical agents, collapsing cause into consequence so as to convey a sense of self-propulsion. People rarely make appearances in this narrative, and the economy is given short shrift. Rather, much of the book is written in an impressionistic mold, with broad "ideologies like neoliberalism" (115), "1960s social movements" (147), and the "international human rights movement" (119) responsible for the demise of civic religion and the attendant reemergence of American individualism. This makes it very difficult to explain *why* citizenship was eclipsed. He narrates the eclipse to be sure, but he never adequately *explains* it.

Despite these limits, *A New American Creed* initiates a long overdue project of providing an account of populism's reemergence in the *longue durée*. This is certainly a worthwhile enterprise, and I hope subsequent scholars continue to work in this tradition, though they would benefit from adopting a global perspective and clearly specifying their object of analysis.