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Commentary, analysis and investigations
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October 16, 2008 - Issue 295

[Contents of Issue Menu](#)

Click Here

[Home](#)

**Right-Wing Populism & the Economic Crisis:
Watch Out for Scapegoats!
The African World
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In the face of economic crises there is always a search for scapegoats. Particularly in the case of modern capitalism, there remains a certain level of disbelief that crises are built into the system, i.e., that capitalism generates crises (and always has!).

Because many of us would rather believe that capitalism is a rational system that should work on its own, sort of along the lines of a self-aware computer (think *Terminator*), when there is an economic downturn, whether a mild recession, financial collapse, severe recession or depression, mainstream commentators often attempt to define the problem in terms of errors (or greed) on the part of specific individuals. Thus, in the current crisis it should not surprise us that Senator McCain has focused on WHO, that is, which individuals, are responsible for the meltdown rather than acknowledging that it is the system.

McCain, however, is not the worst of the problem, though he actually assists those who are. The real danger rests with *right-wing populism* and its adherents. Right-wing populism, an ideological current that promotes the idea that the people (usually defined in racial terms, and in the case of the USA, *white people*) are being trampled on by nefarious individuals - usually from a minority group - who are seeking to derail the "American Dream." Such evil people allegedly conspire, often against allegedly good, patriotic working people and business people.

Well, there are certainly evil people out there, and many of them are rich. And, they often conspire against the rest of us. But what right-wing populism ignores is that there is actually an *economic system* that promotes the greed and avarice, and reproduces itself generation after generation. This economic system - called capitalism - is not the

extension of a particular racial or ethnic group. In addition, there is nothing that should make white people impervious to the perils of capitalism and, therefore, they are taken by surprise when the economy cracks and their dreams vaporize.

Yet the narrative developed by right-wing populism is very persuasive. When the focus can be on certain individuals or groups it is much easier to identify the problem-source. Rather than accepting that there is a system that needs to be changed, right-wing populism suggests eliminating certain groups and the current system will work just perfectly. "Eliminating" can mean anything from banning immigration, ending affirmative action, removing women from the formal workforce or, in more extreme cases, committing genocide.

When there are financial crises there is normally a particular spin that right-wing populism offers: *blame the Jews*. And, so it is that we are already beginning to hear little codes in the discussions coming out of the political Right. The fixation on naming the names, and other subtle and not so subtle hints of a particular group behind the financial meltdown should have our guard up. In the 1980s, the farm foreclosure crisis witnessed the rise of significant anti-Jewish sentiment in rural areas as Jews were identified with bankers and bankers with Jews. Extreme right-wing populists and fascists made use of this message in order to stir up the countryside, completely ignoring the way the banking system and credit actually works.

In addition, when there are any problems in the USA, one can be guaranteed that in addition to Jews and immigrants, Black America is not far behind in the list of those to be blamed. So it is that in the current situation the political Right seeks to blame the financial crisis on the Community Reinvestment Act and the alleged steps taken by banks - as a result of this act - to give loans to poor and undeserving people.

Once again, the political Right does not let the facts get in the way of their opinions. In the case of the Community Reinvestment Act, this was legislation passed in the 1970s. Therefore, logically, the impact of this Act should have been felt VERY long ago rather than in the first decade of the 21st century. Second, as the *Washington Post* noted ("Activists Angered by Blame for Crisis," October 3, 2008), only a tiny fraction of subprime loans offered since 2000 were in connection with the Community Reinvestment Act. Nevertheless, much like Reagan's portrayal of Black women as welfare queens, the image and impression can stick because of the deep-seated racism within US society.

The fact of the historic strength of right-wing populism in the USA (and, for that matter many other capitalist societies) means that progressive organizations must initiate or extend their agitational and educational efforts to address the myths generated by the political Right. Ignoring the threat from right-wing populism or living in denial is not a sound strategy. Even though right-wing populism is grounded in irrationalism, that does NOT mean it lacks persuasive abilities. Neither does it mean that right-wing populism will be inhibited from becoming a broader political movement due to (inconsistent) democratic traditions in the USA.

It is time for a preemptive strike against right-wing populism and its continual efforts to shift our eyes away from the prize, and instead focus on alleged racial or ethnic enemies. In 1992, the slogan of the moment was "...It's the economy, stupid..."

Perhaps for today we should modify that slogan a bit. The problems we face in the economy do not rest with Jews, immigrants or Blacks: "...it's the system, dummy..." In other words, this is the way that capitalism operates, so one either has to get used to it, or one needs to commit to changing it.

Guess which course I advocate?

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[Contents of Issue Menu](#)

Click Here

[Home](#)

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