An all-American cheer for populism

By Gary Silverman

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It is only an adjective. But it has been dealt a disservice this week and I feel a responsibility as a citizen of the American republic to mount a defence.

I speak of the word “populist”, which has been thrown around with gusto lately to describe the anti-EU factions that gained seats in elections to the EU Parliament.

Because so many of these parties promote a politics of “us versus them” – we would call them tribal if they were found in places with less elegant pastries – the image of populism has suffered as a result.

This development strikes me as un-American (and I say that with all due respect to my European friends, if I still have any).

The starting point for my argument is our Merriam-Webster dictionary of the English language. In it, a populist is defined as “a member of a political party claiming to represent the common people” or “a believer in the rights, wisdom, or virtues of the common people”. You will note that there are no national, racial or religious qualifiers.

When capitalised in this country, the word refers to “a member of a US political party formed in 1891 primarily to represent agrarian interests and to advocate the free coinage of silver and government control of monopolies”.

This People’s party – which won in five states (Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Nevada and North Dakota) in the 1892 presidential election – was, like any assemblage of actual biological organisms, a mixed bag. It’s true, too, that some of its leaders went on to far lesser things – such as Tom Watson of Georgia, who when young worked to forge a coalition of poor whites and blacks in the south, then later gained notoriety as a racist and anti-Semite.

But the record of our Populists stands as evidence that the term is not – by definition – pejorative. Whether you agree with them or not, they were serious people who believed in what historian Christopher Lasch called “the central promise of American life: the democratisation of intelligence”.

These Populists did more than say “no” to the modern world or to the fiscal and immigration policies of their time. Working with their minds as well as their hands, they tried to imagine a better America. Many of their dreams – the secret ballot, the eight-hour workday, the graduated income tax and the direct election of US senators, among them – came true.
It is testimony to their intellectual ambition that they focused so relentlessly on the currency question. During a period of epic income disparity and grinding poverty, these workers and farmers campaigned for a looser monetary policy. They embraced the coinage of silver so that they could break free from a “cross of gold”.

Aggressive action by the federal government, in this Populist view, was necessary to the maintenance of a free state. In much the same way as people today call for an open internet, the Populists supported government ownership of the railroads as a way to prevent the exploitation of producers by rentiers.

As historian Eric Foner of Columbia University told me this week: “The Populist movement was aimed at corralling or limiting the power of giant corporations to control people’s lives.”

But, he said: “The word has lost any historic, substantive meaning,” adding, “I wish the FT would drop the adjective ‘populist’.”

In today’s Europe, Professor Foner argues, the word “populist” has become a term of disdain – employed by purveyors of a presupposed consensus seeking to disparage popular passions.

“What is the opposite of populist?” he asked. “As used, it’s responsible, or middle of the road or rational.”

The problem is that being dismissive isn’t exactly the same thing as being descriptive. Populist is hardly the best word to describe chauvinistic leaders such as Marine Le Pen of France’s National Front or Heinz-Christian Strache of Austria’s Freedom party.

You don’t have to be an expert on contemporary European politics to realise that these politicians aren’t exactly believers in “the rights, wisdom, or virtues of the common people”, as the dictionary puts it. They are believers in the rights, wisdom and virtues of their people. There is a difference.

Calling such people “populist” is dangerous because it is ultimately euphemistic. It is an avoidance of reality – a manner of speaking for polite, well-educated Europeans who now find it really rather awkward to face unpleasant facts.