

The Greed Problem: Why Cultural Populism is an Asset Class for the Elites

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Published September 3, 2026

When analyzing the rise of modern right-wing populism in the United States, mainstream commentary frequently gets bogged down in the theater of personality. We treat the central figures of these movements as the root cause of democratic erosion. In reality, however, this highly emotional, media-driven political landscape is a symptom of a much deeper, structural pathology: the deliberate weaponization of cultural anxiety to protect concentrated wealth.

The mechanics of this strategy rely on converting systemic economic pain into a spectacularized cultural crusade. As social hierarchies shift, specific demographics (particularly young, white, Christian men) experience genuine anxieties regarding cultural displacement and a perceived loss of social status. Rather than addressing the economic stagnation driving much of this precarity, political elites and corporate media apparatuses redirect this volatile energy into curated online echo chambers and partisan news networks.

Within these spaces, structural grievances are stripped of their economic context and translated into a narrative of permanent existential crisis, or what anthropologists call "prophetic time." The world is broken down into a binary battleground of good versus evil, resembling a highly entertaining, episodic spectacle designed to keep audiences permanently hooked. For the average consumer, political engagement ceases to be about demanding material policy outcomes; it becomes an immersive form of identity and belonging, fueled by an endless cycle of outrage and fear.

Crucially, this spectacularization serves a highly functional purpose for those at the top of the economic pyramid:

Diversion of Class Consciousness: By framing the primary threat to the citizen as a cultural or ideological enemy rather than economic exploitation, the public's anger is safely containerized.

A Highly Compliant Electorate: By targeting vulnerabilities surrounding identity and masculinity, elites manufacture an intensely loyal voting bloc that is easily mobilized but asks for nothing in the way of redistributive economic policy.

Protection of the Status Quo: While the public is absorbed in the daily drama of cultural warfare, wealth concentration continues unabated, and the core structural inequalities of American society remain completely unaddressed.

Ultimately, diagnosing modern populist movements as a mere crisis of bigotry or a failure of media literacy misjudges the nature of the game. The current political environment does not persist by accident; it persists because it is immensely profitable for a small class of elites who retain vast material influence through its maintenance. America does not fundamentally have a populist problem, it has an extraction problem. Until political analysis shifts its focus away from

the performers on the stage and back toward the economic beneficiaries in the wings, the root structures of power will remain untouched.