

TWO FICTIONALIZATIONS OF AMERICAN POPULISM: EDWARD
BELLAMY'S *LOOKING BACKWARD 2000-1887* AND SINCLAIR LEWIS'S *IT CAN'T
HAPPEN HERE*

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This paper discusses two best-selling fictional novels published at key moments in the history of American populism. The first one, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward 2000-1887*, is a famous utopia and protest novel that helped crystalize the populist movement and exerted influence on the political agenda and organization of the People's Party in the early 1890s. The other, *It Can't Happen Here*, is a realist dystopia written by Nobel Prize laureate Sinclair Lewis in 1935, in an epoch marked by the successes and failures of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and the rise of fascism and communism in the United States and abroad. It was also the time when the populist label had been extended to a special kind of left-wing political profile, one centered on the charismatic leader whose discourse and policies were tainted by demagoguery and authoritarianism. Huey P. Long, the colorful political boss from Louisiana, and Father Charles Coughlin, a Roman Catholic priest turned radio star from Detroit who spoke admiringly of Hitler and Mussolini, are prime examples of that species. Reading these two novels and reflecting over their relationship with populism may shed light on the transformation of the perception of American populism in its first fifty years of existence, from a progressive reform movement to an anti-democratic movement fueled by irrational resentments. In addition, approaching the history of American populism through these novels enables one to focus less on the "supply" side of populist politics (i.e. the populist leader and the populist party), as most analysts and commentators of populism do, and more on the "demand" side of it (i.e. the people/voters' perception of and need for populist politics and politicians). Out of the many and often contradictory definitions of populism in political science, one will be selected, argued for and used throughout the essay.