

Reflections on Populism

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It has become conventional wisdom that populism is on the rise across the West: from the American Tea Party to the Front National in France, from Umberto Bossi's Lega Nord and Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement in Italy to new anti-Islamic and anti-immigration parties which actually feature liberal-sounding concepts such as 'freedom' and 'progress' in their names.² And then there is of course Latin America, where populism is often perceived as a long-standing political tradition, and where populist leaders have recently occupied center stage (and office) in a number of countries. No wonder, then, that the Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev has declared our time an 'Age of Populism'.³

But what is populism? Many people seem to think that they know it when they see it, or, rather, when they see certain policy demands being articulated: less immigration, calls for lower taxes, appealing to working class and petty bourgeois fears of social decline, resentment of urban and cosmopolitan elites – these all seem the hallmarks of populist rhetoric, at least in Europe. Social explanations are readily at hand as well: citizens feel anxious about globalization, modernization, etc.

Yet can one really rest content with such a laundry list of attributes that point in a rightist direction, when populism at least in some historical contexts – particularly in the United States – has also been associated with *progressive* politics? Or is this just a confusion, a matter of differing applications of the word 'populism', which tells us nothing about the 'real

² See, for instance, Pierre-André Taguieff (ed.), *Le retour du populisme - un défi pour les démocraties européennes* (Paris: Universalis, 2004).

³ Ivan Krastev, 'The populist moment', at <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2007-09-18-krastev-en.html> [last accessed 1st March 2012].

phenomenon’ or, put differently, the proper concept of populism?⁴ Would conceptual history help us to clarify matters? After all, only that which has no history can be defined; for everything else there are *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*.⁵

The confusions do not stop with questions of left and right, though. What are we to make of politicians who advocate policies that one finds on the standard laundry list, but who appear to be part of the traditional political class? In what sense, if any, could Tony Blair and Nicolas Sarkozy be said to have been populists? Just because of attempts at broad and direct appeal to ‘the people’? One would think that in poll-driven democracies every politician wants to appeal to ‘the people’; everyone wants to tell a story that can be understood by as many citizens as possible; all want to be sensitive to how ‘ordinary folks’ think and – in particular – feel. Is it enough, then, to understand populism as a kind of political style?

For all the talk about populism – it is far from obvious that we know what we are really talking about. This is not for want of trying. Interestingly, over the past few years thinkers on the Left have done most to attempt to understand populism better – and sometimes even to redeem aspects of it.⁶ Ernesto Laclau – the most sophisticated theorist of populism in recent times – has argued that populism is about the formation of political subjects (and, ultimately, the creation of cultural hegemony): populist leaders and movements focus on one demand (such as

⁴ Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner (eds.), *Populism: its meaning and national character* (London 1969). This volume was based on a conference at the London School of Economics in 1967 – and reading the proceedings only goes to show that then just as now all kinds of very different anxieties find a focus in concerns about populism: then it was de-colonization, the future of peasantry, and the origins and likely developments of Communism and Maoism.

⁵ See the article ‘Volk’ authored by Koselleck *et al.* in volume 7 of the *GG*.

⁶ See in particular Margaret Canovan, ‘Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy’, in: *Political Studies*, vol. 47 (1999), 2-16.

lower taxes) with which many people can identify – so far so obvious – but which also comes to stand in for many other demands that supposedly are not addressed by the system as it is. One struggle turns into the equivalent of many others.⁷

Laclau has been heavily criticized by fellow leftists who charge that populism always relies on the creation of enemies – and is even ‘proto-fascist’.⁸ Laclau, however, precisely tried to argue that *all* politics (or, more precisely: the political) is about the creation of popular identities through conflict; his point was to overcome conventional, pejorative meanings of populism and make the Left understand that ‘constructing a people is the main task of radical politics’.⁹ This is an original theory, though a deeply flawed one from a liberal point of view. It is also one that consciously and purposefully extends the meaning of populism to such an extent that the term appears to lose all analytical value in understanding the particular phenomena which, for better or for worse, many observers feel share characteristics that are not simply explained by the nature of political struggle in general. Whatever one might and might not want to do by way of recovering ‘the political’ for the Left, simply using the word populism when one means the political, will not help in comprehending populism in particular.¹⁰ In fact, it’s a kind of linguistic sleight of hand to signal that one does not suffer from demophobia and fear of the masses – but the price has been to lose any particular *concept* of populism.

⁷ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, ‘Against the Populist Temptation’, in: *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 32 (2006), 551-74.

⁹ Of course it also led to highly questionable diagnoses of present-day political development. Think, for instance, of the claim that working-class support for the Front National in France is best explained by the fact that the ‘ontological need to express social division was stronger than its ontic attachment to a left-wing discourse’. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 88.

¹⁰ See also the trenchant critique in Andrew Arato, ‘Political Theology and Populism’, in: *Social Research*, vol. 80 (2013).

These problems are inherent in Laclau's approach. But they also point to larger problems – and peculiarities – in the conversation about populism. Three are worth saying more about. First, many times evocations of populism only seem to serve the purpose of criticizing something else: the supposed rise of 'post-democracy', for instance, or the failings of allegedly 'rationalist liberalism'.¹¹ In other words: populism (now seen as something negative, not as a synonym for the political) is a symptom, or an outright pathology itself, but, more important, it is a mirror image of what might be wrong with democracy or liberalism.

More particularly: usage of the word populism signals both anxieties by liberals about democracy and by democrats about liberalism. Put very schematically: liberals worry about increasingly illiberal democracy, while democrats are increasingly exasperated with what they perceive as undemocratic or even anti-democratic 'liberal technocracy'. But in both cases, there is actually not much point in trying to explain, or even just in detail to describe, populism itself.

Second, in no other area of political thought does it seem so easy – and so acceptable in polite liberal society -- to treat political phenomena as forms of pathology or pollution: there is talk about political 'deviations', 'disfigurements' or even 'disease'. At the very least, populism is dismissed as an illusion. Pierre Rosanvallon, for instance, has observed that what Marx said about religion also holds about populism: it is a sign of some real distress (of democracy, that is) – but it is at the same time a profound illusion.¹²

¹¹ See Colin Crouch, *Postdemocracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004) and Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000).

¹² Pierre Rosanvallon, 'Penser le populisme', *la vie des idées*, at <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Penser-le-populisme.html> [last accessed 15 March 2012].

Finally: hardly anywhere else do things get emotional so easily: liberal critics of populism are habitually suspected of ‘demophobia’; populists are accused of being driven by resentment. Sometimes it does indeed seem that ‘we’ – good liberal democrats that we are – also resent something, namely the intrusion of populists into liberal democracy, as if we had a bad conscience about the unfulfilled promises of democracy and populists remind us that we have not just come to accept the fact of broken promises – to allude to Norberto Bobbio -- but also prefer to forget that the promises were made in the first place. Hence all the talk by self-declared ‘democratic theorists’ about populism potentially having value as being ‘disruptive’ (whatever that might mean), as serving a ‘corrective function’ or even being ‘redemptive’.

Saving the Phenomena

So what to make of all this? I wish to suggest that we need a theory of populism as a means to comprehend a *political phenomenon* that is neither just an ideology, nor a style, nor a particular kind of party or movement. Populism, I contend, is a profoundly illiberal and, in the end directly undemocratic, understanding of representative democracy. It has an inner logic which makes both the claims and the actions of populists hang together in a particular way; and by both their claims and their actions can we tell them. But we do not just need criteria to identify populist claims; we also require an account of populism as a political process, as a sequence of actions which tend to be in line with the implications of the major claims populists make.

The last point might sound both cryptic and anodyne. What I wish to get at is the fact that, contrary to a wide-spread perception, populists can actually govern *as populists*, but that their form of governance will take a characteristic shape that is justified by the major public arguments populists put forward. It is wrong to think that populists cannot govern, because populist parties are always protest parties and hence cannot properly exercise power (since protest cannot govern). On the contrary, just as there is an inner coherence to the populist imagination, there is coherence to populist conduct. But if populism hangs together in a particular way and can seem in the eyes of many people like the real thing – democracy – it becomes all the more important to puzzle out how democratic principles and practices do or do not hang together in a different way. Many analysts have worried about the sense that populism is not just a ‘shadow’ of democracy or a deformed version of it, but a successful impersonator. All the more urgent, then, that democratic thought offers reasons for how democracy differs from populism.

This essay will proceed as follows. I shall first dismiss a number for what I consider false starts in understanding populism. I shall then put forward ways to identify particularly populist claims and suggest that the public arguments populists espouse are internally coherent – but that they are categorically different from a proper understanding of representative democracy. I shall also argue that observers who hold that populists are calling for more political participation, or even direct democracy, are profoundly mistaken; populists are not against the principle of representation as such, they simply want different representatives and, crucially, a relationship between representatives and represented which differs from a proper liberal-democratic understanding of representation. Hence populism should not be thought of as

a useful ‘corrective’ to problems with contemporary liberal democracy – let alone be seen as ‘redemptive’.

In a third step, I shall analyze populism as a process and, especially, as a distinctive approach to governing. Finally, by way of application of the more general theoretical claims in this essay, I shall say a few words about the particular vulnerability of the post-war European political order to populism and suggest how one can distinguish between genuine populists and what some have called ‘democratic activists’ on the European scene today.¹³ After all, leading European politicians now frequently warn that populism is today the largest threat to the EU, and perhaps even to nation-state liberal democracies. Think, for instance, of the President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, stating categorically ‘the big problem today is populism’.¹⁴ But is it? I argue that the inflationary use of the term populism in European public discourse signifies a failure of political judgment, which is to say, the capacity to draw proper distinctions. But overextending the concept of populism only plays into the hands of populists – while increasing the frustrations and sometimes outright anger of those who actually seek more political participation, but are in fact not populists.

¹³ See in particular the work by Catherine Fieschi.

¹⁴ Van Rompuy held: ‘Die große Gefahr ist der Populismus. Als Belgier weiß ich, was das heißt’, in: ‘Anlaufstelle für Merkel und Sarkozy’, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 9 April 2010. Or see: ‘Italian Prime Minister Calls Populism a Threat to Stability in Europe’, in: *New York Times*, 15 October 2013, at: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/15/world/europe/italian-prime-minister-calls-populism-a-threat-to-stability-in-europe.html?_r=0 [last accessed 13 November 2013].

A common approach to populism is to claim that one can pinpoint it by way of a particular, clearly identifiable class base: for instance, the petty bourgeoisie, what in France are known as *les classes populaires*, or, more specifically and in less static terms: the supposed losers of modernization or of globalization. Empirical studies do not bear out this picture. Parties generally considered populist often have voters who do fit this sociological profile – but in many other cases they do not. Sometimes it is precisely the *arrivistes*, the newly successful who adopt a de facto Social Darwinist Weltanschauung and treat less successful citizens as inherently inferior, or as not properly belonging the polity at all (on the importance of this criterion more in just a moment). Those electing populists are also not necessarily less educated, though they tend to be overwhelmingly male, at least in Europe.¹⁵ In short: there is no clear-cut class or social base for populism.¹⁶

Another common view of populism is that its proponents and supporters exhibit a distinct *social-psychological* profile. We are dealing with people driven by resentment, by anxieties about a loss of status and prestige or even by paranoia. Clearly, this account can link up with the sociological account discussed just a moment ago, but it is not identical with it; it would be revealed in surveys and the rhetoric of populist politicians, more than by income brackets. As

¹⁵ The gender gap is considerably smaller in Latin America – but then again, as should become clear later on, some supposed cases of populism will turn out not to be populist at all, if one follows my approach. On gender aspects, see Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, ‘Populism’, in: Michael Freeden (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (New York: Oxford UP, 2013), 493-512.

¹⁶ For empirical evidence along these lines see Karin Priester, *Rechter und linker Populismus: Annäherung an ein Chamäleon* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2012).

with the sociological account, however, there is little empirical evidence to support the notion that resentment, fear or friend-enemy thinking is an exclusive property of populism. Moreover, much more so than the sociological reading of populism, the psychological perspective tends to confirm the view of populists themselves that, rather than taking their actual political claims seriously, certain liberal observers can only deal with populism by treating it as a pathology, or, less starkly put, by prescribing a kind of political therapy, along the lines of: we don't need to understand what they want; we only need to get to the bottom of how they feel. And then we need to make them feel better.

Thirdly, there is the common tendency to claim that populism is characterized by a clearly identifiable set of policies, or rather: by the quality, or rather; by the lack of quality in policies. Populist policies are said to be simplistic, irresponsible, even irrational, pandering to people's short-term desires, etc.¹⁷ The question is of course: *quis iudicabit?* Who draws the line between responsible and irresponsible policies? My point is not that the distinction is meaningless or entirely subjective – good reasons can be given for drawing a distinction here rather than there – but that no such distinction can suffice clearly to identify a set of political actors as populists. A concept such as demagogue might be more useful here.

Populism, then, is not about a particular social base or a particular set of emotions or particular policies; rather, it is a particular *moral imagination of politics*, a way of perceiving the political world which opposes a morally pure and fully unified – but ultimately fictional – people

¹⁷ For instance Ralf Dahrendorf claiming that 'populism is simple, democracy is complex', 'Acht Anmerkungen zum Populismus', in: *Transit: Europäische Revue*, no. 25 (2003), 156-63.

to small minorities who are put outside the authentic people.¹⁸ In other words, the people are not really what *prima facie* appear as the people in its entirety; rather, as Claude Lefort put it, first ‘the people must be extracted from within the people’.¹⁹ Most commonly, ‘morality’ is specified with languages of work and corruption. Populists pit the pure, innocent, always hard-working people against a corrupt elite who do not really work (other than to further their narrow self-interest), and, in right-wing populism, also against the very bottom of society (those who also do not really work and live off others). Right-wing populists typically construe an ‘unhealthy coalition’ between the elite that does not really belong and marginal groups that do not really belong either: classic examples are liberal elites and racial minorities in the US, or socialist elites and ethnic groups such as the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe (both of whom are also supported by an illegitimate outside power, the European Union), or ‘communists’ and illegal immigrants (according to Silvio Berlusconi and the Lega Nord) in Italy. The controversy over Barack Obama’s birth certificate made this logic almost ridiculously obvious and literal: in the eyes of the ‘birthers’, the president is in fact an usurper, a foreigner, someone who does not belong and who has appropriated the office under false pretexts.

In the populist imaginary, then, elites are immoral in the specific sense that they actually work only for themselves (as opposed to the common good) *and*, if my earlier proposition is correct, for essentially undeserving minorities who do not truly belong to the demos (but who in turn support the corrupt elite).²⁰ Both are opposed to an authentic people, often also

¹⁸ As I shall argue further below, populists are not against representation – hence I disagree with analyses that pit ‘populist democracy’ against ‘representative democracy’, for example the otherwise excellent article by Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens, ‘Populism versus Democracy’, in: *Political Studies*, vol. 55 (2007), 405-24.

¹⁹ Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, 88.

²⁰ As Krastev puts it, both groups do not belong, do not pay enough in taxes, and, in some contexts, are supported by supranational institutions and cosmopolitan elites (such as the EU).

symbolically identified with what Paul Taggart notably called a ‘heartland’.²¹ This moral conception clearly depends on some criterion for distinguishing the pure and the corrupt, and since ‘work’ itself can be too indeterminate, hence populism crucially relies on the notion that there is a distinct common good, that the people can discern *and* will it, and that a politician or a party or, for that matter, a movement, can unambiguously implement such a conception of the common good as policy. In this sense, as Cas Mudde has pointed out, populism is always at least somewhat Rousseauian, even if there are also important differences (to which I shall turn further below). Moreover, this emphasis on one common good, clearly comprehensible to common sense, and capable of being articulated as one correct policy also explains why populism is so often associated with the idea of an over-simplification of policy challenges.²²

The specifically *moral* conception of politics which populists espouse has two important implications. First of all, populists do not have to be against the principle of representation – in fact, they can positively endorse it, as long as the right representatives represent the right people who are making the right judgment and consequently willing the right thing, so to speak. Some populists demand more referenda, to be sure – but only as a means to discern the right thing more clearly; not because they wish for the people to participate continuously in politics, or because they want at least some ordinary people to have a say in government (as recent proposals for selecting representatives by lot would suggest). Populists view the people as essentially passive, once the proper popular will aimed at the proper common

²¹ Paul Taggart, *Populism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000).

²² Pierre Rosanvallon has expanded on the point by arguing that populism involves a *triple* simplification: a political-sociological simplification along the lines of homogeneous people versus corrupt elites; second, a procedural and institutional simplification directed against the messy world of intermediary powers; and third, a simplification of the social bond which is reduced to being a matter of homogeneous identity. Picking up a thought by Cas Mudde, I would add a fourth: a moral simplification: pure people versus morally corrupt elites.

good has been ascertained; and, in theory – and in practice -- that will can be ascertained without any popular participation whatsoever. Think of Berlusconi's reign in Italy: the ideal was for a Berlusconi supporter comfortably to sit at home, watch TV, and leave matters of state to the *Cavaliere*, who would successfully govern the country like a very large company. No need to enter the piazza and try to participate. Or think of the second Orbán government in Hungary, which crafted an authentic national constitution (after some sham process of 'national consultation' by questionnaire), but felt no need to put that constitution to popular referendum.

It is tempting to think that populists would opt for the principle of identity (or even incarnation) over that of representation, to pick up the distinction famously elaborated by Carl Schmitt in his *Verfassungslehre*.²³ And at first sight, many populist leaders seem to conform to the expectation that they are 'just like us', that they tend to be 'men (or even women) of the people' (think of slogans such as 'India is Indira' or 'Yo soy el pueblo'). Of course, the very opposite is also often held to characterize populist leaders: that they are charismatic. Or, third possibility: they are charismatic, because they are so much like us -- only more so, or in some way that shows that one can be ordinary and yet at the same time exhibit extraordinary political gifts. How else to make sense of a figure like Hugo Chávez, who famously claimed 'I am a little of all of you'?

My argument is that the basic logic of representation through the mechanism of election, as analyzed by Bernard Manin, also applies to populists: one chooses a populist politician because of his or her superior capacity to discern the common good as – in theory – judged and willed by the people. That person might seem more likely to discern the common good because

²³ See Carl Schmitt, *Verfassungslehre*, 237: 'Diejenigen, die regieren, sind durch das Volk, nicht vom Volk unterschieden'.

he or she shares important features with us – but this is not a necessary condition.²⁴ In any case, nobody can strictly speaking be ‘identical’ with us – though, to be sure, that was the promise of a movement like National Socialism, legally operationalized by the Carl Schmitt who emphasized the crucial role of *Artgleichheit* [racial homogeneity or identity].²⁵

To be sure, populism seems unthinkable without a strong, direct bond between a leader who is outside traditional political systems and citizens who feel neglected by mainstream parties. In that sense, there is indeed a populist incentive to ‘cut out the middleman’ and to try to rely as little as possible on parties as intermediaries between citizens and politicians (Nadia Urbinati has coined the useful, if at first sight paradoxical, concept of *direct representative democracy* for this phenomenon).²⁶ But all this is not about either ordinariness or, for that matter, charisma, on the part of leaders. A telling example of the actual logic at work is the election slogans of the Austrian politician Heinz-Christian Strache (successor to Jörg Haider as chairman of the FPÖ): ‘ER will, was WIR wollen’ – ‘HE wants what WE want’, which is not quite the same as: ‘he is like you’. Or, another one: ‘Er sagt, was Wien denkt’, ‘He says, what Vienna thinks’, not: ‘He says (or is), what Vienna is’. The leader correctly discerns what we correctly think; not: he automatically gets it right, because he is just like us.²⁷

True, if it happened to be a genuinely charismatic Chávez who got it right, then Chávismo was all the more likely to succeed. Yet it could be someone else; it could be a group

²⁴ Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1997).

²⁵ In *Staat, Bewegung, Volk*.

²⁶ Nadia Urbinati, ‘Zwischen allgemeiner Anerkennung und Misstrauen’, in: *Transit: Europäische Revue*, no. 44 (2013).

²⁷ In this sense populist ideals of representation are neither indicative nor responsive, in Philip Pettit’s terms, though they tend towards the indicative pole. See Philip Pettit, *On the People’s Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2013).

of politicians; it could even be nobody particularly identifiable at all (who really leads the Tea Party movement?). The point for voters going populist is that current elites fail truly to represent them. They are not against representation as such: they just want different representatives, people who they consider morally pure.²⁸ In that sense, populism without participation is an entirely coherent proposition; and it is not an accident that populists in power (more on this below) often adopt a ‘caretaker’-attitude towards an essentially passive people.²⁹ This practice – more on which below – is clearly not the same as what a follower of Rousseau would demand; not because Rousseau sought continuous direct participation by the people as whole, but because laws would require actual consent (not tacit, but actually taciturn, as nobody was allowed to debate them). Moreover, populists might occasionally present themselves as commissaries who faithfully implement popular judgment and will (in the way that Rousseau justified the existence of delegates without taking sovereignty from the people) – but this is a more or less obvious fiction.³⁰ Populists will act *as if* they had obtained a popular imperative mandate and *as if* laws corresponded to some antecedently ascertained general will – hence no need for actual ratification of such laws by the people, let alone a recall that might be required by a violation of the imperative mandate. The clear recent case of this would be Hungary, where the government in retrospect construed its election as a ‘revolution in the voting booths’, but avoided any direct consultation once the supposed mandate had been carried out.

²⁸ Hence the often-heard claim that political actors advocating populism are themselves part of an elite – clearly meant to show up some obvious form of hypocrisy – also falls flat.

²⁹ Such a notion has arguably been facilitated by the development of ‘audience democracy’. See Manin, *The Principles*, and Jeffrey Edward Green, *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship* (New York: Oxford UP, 2010).

³⁰ Nadia Urbinati, ‘Representative democracy and its critics’, in: Sonia Alonso et al. (eds.), *The Future of Representative Government* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2011), 23-48.

In short, then, populism is not against the principle of representation – but its account of representation is a highly peculiar one, and ultimately one not compatible with one based on actual input and continuous influence by citizens divided amongst themselves (as opposed to representations of fictions of the common good). Populists are clearly against the features often associated with parliaments: extended deliberation, i.e. dithering; factions more interested in fighting each other than doing what is good for the people, etc. – which explains why an observer such as Dahrendorf could go so far as to claim that populism in its essence was *anti-parliamentary*. This leads to a larger point: while populism does not oppose the principles of representation and the practices of election, what populism necessarily has to deny is any kind of pluralism or social division: in the populist imagination there is *only* the people on the one hand and, on the other hand, the illegitimate intruders into our politics, from both above and from below, so to speak.³¹ And there is only one proper common good to be discerned by the authentic people. Hence, according to the populist Weltanschauung, there can be no such thing as a *legitimate opposition* -- which, after all, is one of the key features of liberal democracy, understood as a form of contained conflict between competing factions (contained, that is, by an underlying consensus about the legitimacy of democratic institutions and the disagreement taking place within them).³²

This principled anti-pluralism then also explains why populists so frequently oppose the, so to speak, ‘morally correct’ outcome of a vote to the actual empirical outcome of an election,

³¹ To be sure, there is nothing valuable about pluralism as such: pluralism and diversity are not values like liberty and justice. In this sketch I take it as a given – with Weber *et al.* – that modern societies are pluralist, both in terms of specialized value spheres, and more broadly in terms of value pluralism.

³² This raises the question of the status of ‘social division’ in political theory and in accounts of populism in particular. My approach is sociological and broadly Weberian; I would not want to commit to an ontological account, as can be found in Mouffe and Laclau.

when the latter was not in their favor (which of course is a variation of contrasting the general will and the will of all). Think of Victor Orbán claiming after losing the 2002 Hungarian elections that ‘the nation cannot be in opposition’; or think of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, arguing, after his failed bid for the Mexican presidency in 2006, that ‘the victory of the right is morally impossible’ (and declaring himself ‘the legitimate president of Mexico’)³³; or think of Tayyip Erdoğan insisting in the face of rather strong empirical evidence that Turkish citizens were protesting against his policies in Gezi Park that the protesters did not belong to the Turkish people. In short, the logic of populism is not: we are the 99 percent. It is: we are the 100 percent.

Yet one might question whether we are dealing with a truly distinctive characteristic of populism here. After all, few political actors go around claiming: we are just a faction; we are just representing special interests. And few admit that their opponents might be just as right as they are – the logic of political competition and differentiation would make that impossible. The difference is also not that populist politicians do not ultimately respect the rules of the democratic game: both Orbán in 2002 and López Obrador in 2006 mobilized great street protests and opposed the people as actually present in public squares to the corrupt and largely invisible elites – but in the end they did accept defeat; the claims to legitimacy yielded to an acceptance of legality.

The real difference, then, is that they consistently and continuously deny the very legitimacy of their opponents – as opposed to just saying that some of their policies are

³³ Kathleen Bruhn, “‘To hell with your corrupt institutions!’: AMLO and populism in Mexico”, in: Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (eds.), *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for democracy?* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2012), 88-112.

misguided – and that they are willing to risk a crisis of liberal democracy as such – essentially calling into question the trustworthiness of the procedures of representative democracy. So non-populist politicians don't ordinarily claim in rousing speeches that they actually speak for nothing more than: a faction. But they would concede that representation is temporary and fallible, that contrary opinions might be legitimate, and that society *cannot* be represented without remainder (of course, we do not usually test empirically whether in fact they would make such concessions...)

Principled anti-pluralism also explains another feature of populist politics which is often commented on in isolation, that is to say: without any connection to the overall logic of the populist imagination. I refer to the fact that populist parties are almost always internally monolithic, with the rank-and-file clearly subordinated to a single leader (or, less often, a group of leaders). Now, 'internal democracy' of political parties – which some constitutions actually take to be a litmus test for the legitimacy and the legality of parties – can be a bit of a pious hope: many parties still are what Max Weber had said all along they were: machines for selecting and electing leaders, or at best arenas for personality-driven micro-politics, as opposed to a forum for reasoned debate. While this is undoubtedly a general tendency of parties, populist parties are particularly prone to purging dissenters. If there is only one common good and only one way to represent it faithfully (as opposed to a self-consciously partisan, but also self-consciously fallible interpretation of what the common good might be)³⁴, then disagreement within the party that claims to be the sole legitimate representative of the common good cannot be permissible.

³⁴ Jonathan White and Lea Ypi, 'On Partisan Political Justification', in: *American Political Science Review*, vol. 105 (2011), 381-96.

The populist desire for a (de facto unachievable) unity – and the denial of legitimate disagreement and divisions – actually shows a surprising affinity between the populist political imagination and totalitarianism (also understood as a form of political imaginary). Not the totalitarianism as described by classic Cold War liberals such as Carl Joachim Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, but the totalitarianism theorized by members of the post-war French Left, such as Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis, in the 1970s and 1980s. These thinkers claimed that totalitarianism is not properly understood as a regime making total claims on its subjects – no regime could ever achieve this, short of putting its populations permanently into camps – but as the vision of a completely unified society (or people) literally embodied in a leader like Hitler or Stalin. As Lefort put it:

Democracy combines these two apparently contradictory principles: on the one hand, power emanates from the people; on the other hand, it is the power of nobody. And democracy thrives on this contradiction. Whenever the latter risks being resolved or is resolved, democracy is either close to destruction or already destroyed... If the image of the people is actualized, if a party claims to identify with it and to appropriate power under the cover of this identification, then it is the very principle of the distinction between the state and society... which is denied. This phenomenon is characteristic of totalitarianism.³⁵

³⁵ Claude Lefort, 'The Logic of Totalitarianism', in: *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), 273-91; here 280.

Clearly, populists as we know them in Western democracies do not seek to actualize totalitarian practices as we know them from twentieth-century history. But the fact remains that their claim to be the sole legitimate representative of the authentic people – and hence the legitimacy of them permanently appropriating the empty seat of power in a democracy – contains an affinity with totalitarianism as understood by Lefort in particular.

This shows that populism is ultimately not about claims along the lines of: ‘we want a little more democracy – especially direct democracy – and a little less liberalism, or the rule of law, or constitutionalism’ (in theory, a populist and hence highly partisan constitution can be said fully to express the permanent unitary will of the people – which is to say, some people of the people). Rather – using Lefort’s framework – the pure people – or, in fact, the image of a pre-procedural people, as represented by a party or a single leader – will seek to occupy democracy’s empty space of power; of course, they cannot do so directly, so an agent claiming to speak for the people within the people will try to do so (even if de facto these agents in the end accept an election that goes against them, *morally* they are always in power).³⁶ In Lefort’s terms, democracy is no longer the common stage on which political conflict takes place (and is contained) that assures the unity of the polity; it is one of the actors on that stage who assumes the task (or, rather, makes the claim that they can assume the task) of *fully* embodying society’s unity (the result being the birth of the populist’s two bodies, so to speak).

³⁶ See also Abts and Rummens, ‘Populism versus Democracy’.

Populism as Process: Occupy the State!

Many scholars have tried to formulate a definition of populism; far fewer have followed the suggestion contained in Robert O. Paxton's seminal work on fascism that, apart from crafting static definitions, one also need to understand a political phenomenon unfolding in stages over time (without thereby committing oneself to any determinist account of 'inevitable' stages).³⁷ At this point, it seems to me, we have hardly any real sense of the historical conditions under which populism is likely to emerge – except for a general expectation that populist forces might be more likely to succeed when established party systems (or, if you prefer, hegemonies) are beginning to decompose. When representation by traditional parties seems less and less legitimate, and when entire political classes are becoming discredited, then the claim that only a new, pure, and uncorrupted force can truly represent the people seems *prima facie* more convincing. Think of the emergence of Berlusconi and *Forza Italia* in the early 1990s as an example of this dynamic.

More can be said, however, about a question which has puzzled analysts of populism for quite some time: whether populists can actually govern *as populists*. Conventional wisdom has it that populist parties are primarily protest parties and that protest cannot govern, since one cannot govern against oneself. While populist parties do indeed in one sense necessarily protest against elites, this does not mean that populism in government will become self-contradictory. First of all, all failures of populists in government can still be blamed on elites acting behind the scenes, whether at home or abroad. And second of all, populists in power are likely to govern

³⁷ Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Allen Lane, 2004). One attempt to follow this approach is Priester, *Rechter und linker Populismus*.

according to the populist logic which holds that only some of the people are actually the real authentic people – and hence deserving of support and, ultimately, good government. In that sense, clientelism is not just a contingent feature of some populist regimes.³⁸ While it is true that many parties in power will seek to reward those who voted for them, populists’ de facto clientelism finds an actual justification in the populist claim that only some really are the people (as opposed to some generally unavowable logic of acquiring and preserving power). It is mass clientelism with a clean moral conscience; a kind of ethocracy.³⁹

This also explains, finally, why populist parties tend to colonize the state itself – again, based on an actual justification drawn from within the moral universe of populism and hence, again, with a clean moral conscience. If only one party truly represents the people, why should the state not truly become the instrument of the people – via the method of filling state offices with ostensibly partisan actors? And, in some cases: when populists have the capacity to formulate a new constitution, why should they not craft one that is highly partisan and based only on the support of a minority of the population – but which can be presented as the only authentic expression of the proper *pouvoir constituant* (which happens to be empirically much smaller than the total number of the adult population)?⁴⁰

³⁸ Priester, *Rechter und linker Populismus*. For the Venezuelan case, see Sebastián L. Mazzuca, ‘The Rise of Rentier Populism’, in: *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 24 (2013), 108-22.

³⁹ Understood as rule by and for the morally pure.

⁴⁰ Recent examples of such partisan constitution-making would be Fidesz’s ‘Easter Constitution’ in Hungary (successful) and the Muslim Brotherhoods’ in Egypt (not successful). For a very illuminating comparison, see Gábor Halmai, ‘Guys with Guns versus Guys with Reports: Egyptian and Hungarian Comparisons’, www.verfassungsblog.de, 15 July 2013, at: <http://www.verfassungsblog.de/de/egypt-hungary-halmai-constitution-coup/#.UoRL0yeJJ0Y> [last accessed 13 November 2013].

Populism in power, then, will mean the appropriation of the state apparatus by political actors who, even in the face of persistent opposition, speak in the name of the whole (and claim: *l'état, c'est nous*) – with the consequence that opposition will be not just a matter being a particular, partisan part of the people, but literally being apart -- from the people.⁴¹ And this is a great irony, because populism in power always brings about or at least reinforces, or offers another variety of, what it most opposes and of what it habitually tends to accuse established elites: exclusion and the usurpation of the state.⁴² What *la casta* supposedly does, populists will also end up doing, only with a clearer justification and a clean conscience. Populism as a vocation means this, then: one can do all the things associated with machine politics – and supposedly pursue an ideal, even an ethics of conscience, at the same time.

One last point: it should have become clear that populists are necessarily against liberal checks and balances (which is not the same as parliamentarism), minority rights, etc., because their view of politics has no need for them at best – and, at worst, they obstruct the expression of the genuine popular will. They are impatient with procedures (and that can include referenda, which are procedures as well, after all) and pre-structured political time. Confusion arises, however, when populist leaders like the Dutch politician Geert Wilders (or even, to some degree, the Front National's Marine Le Pen) evoke seemingly liberal-sounding values such as freedom of choice or toleration (in their attacks on Muslims). But, as Cas Mudde and others have pointed out, here liberal values essentially become *nationalist* values: they serve *only* to exclude. Liberal, ostensibly universalist rhetoric serves to create a de facto aristocracy among the people.

⁴¹ Arato, 'Political Theology', 150.

⁴² Priester, *Rechter und linker Populismus*, 20.

Contemporary Europe: A Proliferation of Populisms?

As said at the outset of this essay, Europe is witnessing an inflationary use of the charge ‘populism’ especially to characterize a range of new political parties and movements. Before assessing whether there really has been a proliferation of populisms, it is important to take a few historical steps back and consider the particular kinds of liberal democracies existing in continental Europe today, in which claims about supposed new populisms are being articulated.

In Western Europe one of the peculiarities of the aftermath of the high point of totalitarian politics in the 1930s and 1940s was the following: both post-war political thought and post-war political institutions were deeply imprinted with antitotalitarianism. Political leaders, as well as jurists and philosophers sought to build an order designed, above all, to prevent a return to the totalitarian past. They relied on an image of the past as a chaotic era characterized by limitless political dynamism, unbound ‘masses’ and attempts to forge a completely unconstrained political subject – such as the purified German *Volksgemeinschaft* or the ‘Soviet People’ (created in Stalin’s image and ratified as really existing in the ‘Stalin Constitution’).

As a consequence, the whole direction of political development in post-war Europe has been towards empowering unelected institutions, such as constitutional courts – but in the name of strengthening democracy itself.⁴³ That development was based on specific lessons that

⁴³ I have made this argument at greater length in *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe* (London: Yale UP, 2011). See also Peter L. Lindseth, ‘The Paradox of Parliamentary Supremacy: Delegation, Democracy, and Dictatorship in Germany and France, 1920-1950s’, in: *Yale Law Journal*, vol. 113 (2004), 1341-415.

Europeans -- rightly or wrongly -- drew from the political catastrophes of midcentury: the architects of the post-war West European order viewed the ideal of popular sovereignty with a great deal of distrust; after all, how could one trust peoples who had brought fascists to power or extensively collaborated with fascist occupiers?⁴⁴ Less obviously, elites also had deep reservations about the idea of parliamentary sovereignty. After all, had not legitimate representative assemblies handed all power over to Hitler and to Marshal Pétain, the leader of Vichy France, in 1933 and 1940 respectively? Hence parliaments in post-war Europe were systematically weakened, checks and balances were strengthened, and non-elected institutions (again, constitutional courts are the prime example) were tasked not just with defending individual rights, but with democracy as a whole.⁴⁵ In short, distrust of unrestrained popular sovereignty, or even unconstrained *parliamentary* sovereignty (what a German constitutional lawyer once called ‘parliamentary absolutism’) are, so to speak, in the very DNA of post-war European politics.⁴⁶ And it is fair to say that these underlying principles of what I have elsewhere called ‘constrained democracy’ were almost always adopted when countries were able to shake off dictatorships and turned to liberal democracy in the last third of the twentieth century: first on the Iberian peninsula in the 1970s, and then in Central and Eastern Europe after

⁴⁴ This was the core of the case for judicial review in these countries: there were no proven democratic institutions and there were good reasons to believe that many citizens would not take individual rights seriously. Cf. Jeremy Waldron, ‘The Core of the Case Against Judicial Review’, in: *Yale Law Journal*, vol. 115(2006), 1346-1406.

⁴⁵ One might add that dignity – and not freedom – is the master value of post-war constitutions.

⁴⁶ Of course, this is another way of saying that while there are indeed ‘constitutional pluralism’ and ‘constitutional tolerance’ in the EU (and while both of these have an important normative dimension), both are still constrained – a fact which every accession process makes clear. See Neil Walker, Neil Walker, ‘The Idea of Constitutional Pluralism’, in: *Modern Law Review*, vol. 65 (2002), 317-59 and J. H. H. Weiler, ‘Federalism Without Constitutionalism: Europe’s *Sonderweg*’, in: Kalypso Nicolaïdis and Robert Howse (eds.), *The Federal Vision: Legitimacy and Levels of Governance in the United States and the European Union* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 54-70.

1989. One might even consider this model of democracy as a kind of European ‘basic structure’, analogous to the doctrine of the Indian Constitutional Court.

European integration, it needs to be emphasized, was part and parcel of this comprehensive attempt to constrain the popular will: it added supranational constraints to national ones⁴⁷ (which is not to say that this entire process was master-minded by anyone, or came about seamlessly: of course, the outcomes were contingent and had to do with who prevailed in particular political struggles – a point which is particularly clear in the case of individual rights protection, a role for which national courts and the European Court of Justice were competing). This logic was more evident initially with institutions like the Council of Europe and the European Convention on Human Rights, but the desire to ‘lock in’ liberal-democratic commitments became more pronounced in a specific EU (or then: EEC) context with the transitions to democracy in Southern Europe in the 1970s.

Now, the upshot of this brief historical excursus is that a political order built on a distrust of popular sovereignty – an explicitly anti-totalitarian and, if you like, implicitly anti-populist order – will always be particularly vulnerable to political actors speaking in the name of the people as a whole. As should have become clear from the discussion in this essay so far, populism is not really a cry for participation, let alone the realization of direct democracy – but it can resemble movements making such cries and hence, *prima facie*, gain some legitimacy on the grounds that the post-war European order really *is* based on the idea of keeping ‘the people’ at a distance.

⁴⁷ One might ask in what way, then, ‘constrained democracy’ differs from ‘guided’ or ‘defective’ democracy. The answer is that in the former genuine changes in who holds power is possible and that all constraints are ultimately justified with regard to strengthening democracy. In the latter no real change is allowed.

Now, why might Europe have become particularly vulnerable to populist actors in recent years? The answer seems obvious: the Eurocrisis. But a crisis – whether economic, social, or ultimately also political – does not automatically produce populism in the sense defended in this essay (except, possibly, when old party systems are disintegrating because of a crisis); on the contrary, democracies can be said perpetually to create crises and, at the same time, to have the resources and mechanisms for self-correction.⁴⁸ Rather, it is the particular approach to addressing the Eurocrisis – for shorthand: technocracy – that has something to do with the rise of populism. In a curious way, the two mirror each other: technocracy holds that there is only one correct policy solution; populism claims that there is only one authentic will of the people aiming at the common good. Most recently, they have also been trading attributes: technocracy has become moralized (‘you Greeks etc. must atone for your sins!’, i.e. profligacy in the past); whereas populism has become business-like (Berlusconi’s *azienda Italia* and Babiš’s promise to run the Czech Republic like one of his companies).⁴⁹ In that sense, both are apolitical and, curiously, lend credence to an epistemic conception of democracy (without actually being one). Hence it is plausible enough to assume that one might pave the way for the other, because it legitimizes the belief that there is no real room for debate and disagreement: after all, there is only one solution; there is only one will.

This, then, also allows for clearer distinctions between genuinely populist parties and movements on the one hand, and, on the other hand, actors who might, for instance, oppose austerity measures and ordoliberal economic prescriptions, but who, ultimately should not be

⁴⁸ Urbinati, *Zwischen Anerkennung*. But compare David Runciman’s claim that democracy’s knowledge about its capacity for self-correction can lead to complacency – and hence fatal crises, after all. David Runciman, *The Confidence Trap* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2013).

⁴⁹ Think also of Jörg Haider claiming: ‘Wir müssen lernen, den Staat als Unternehmen zu begreifen, und ihn dementsprechend führen’. Quoted in Priester, *Rechter und linker Populismus*, 22.

called populists. In Finland, it is the claim that only they represent true Finns – not criticism of the EU – which makes the party which actually happens to be called ‘True Finns’ a populist party. In Italy, it is not Beppe Grillo’s complaints about Italy’s *la casta* and his attempts to empower ordinary citizens that should lead one to worry about him as a populist, but his assertion that his movement wants (and deserves) nothing less than 100 per cent of seats in parliament – all other contenders are considered corrupt and immoral.⁵⁰ Hence, according to this logic, the *grillini* ultimately are the pure Italian people (which then also justifies a kind of dictatorship of virtue inside the Five Star Movement).

Identifying actual populists and distinguishing them from political actors who criticize elites, but do not employ a *pars-pro-toto* logic (such as the *indignados* in Spain) is one task for a theory of populism in Europe today; what some observers have called ‘democratic activists’ – as opposed to populists – first of all advance particular policies, but to the extent that they use people-talk at all, their claim is not: ‘we, and only we, are the people’; rather, it is: ‘we are also the people.’

The other task is to sow some doubt about left-wing strategies that attempt selectively to draw on the populist imaginary to oppose an ordoliberal hegemony. The point is not that critique of the latter is somehow in and of itself populist (in line with the understanding of populism as a matter of ‘irresponsible policies’). Rather, the trouble is with schemes -- very much inspired, it seems, by Laclau’s maxim that ‘constructing a people is the main task of radical politics’ -- to portray today’s main political conflict as one between the people (the ‘governanced’), on the one hand, and the ‘market people’ (Wolfgang Streeck’s *das Marktvolk*), the de facto governors on the

⁵⁰ A distant echo, one might say, of *Uomo Qualunque* and the slogan *Abbasso tutti!*

other.⁵¹ Will such an opposition actually mobilize ‘the people’? Unlikely. Will it import the problems of a genuinely populist conception of politics? Possibly.

What is the alternative? An approach that seeks to bring in those currently excluded – what some sociologists sometimes call ‘the superfluous’ – as well as those risking permanent exclusion because of the impact of the Eurocrisis; while at the same time, so to speak, keeping the very wealthy/powerful in. This is really just another way of saying that a new social contract for the people as a whole is needed. Broad-based support is required for such a new social contract in Southern European countries, and that support can only be built through an appeal to fairness, not just fiscal rectitude. To be sure, lofty appeals are not enough; there has to be a mechanism to authorize such a new settlement. It might come in the shape of a grand coalition actually empowered at election time (so not just contingent and reluctant support of technocratic figures like Mario Monti through the major parties). Alternatively, societies could officially renegotiate their very constitutional settlement – as Iceland and, in a much less dramatic way, Ireland, have been trying to do (without much success in either case – but these are ongoing stories). Iceland has embarked on an unprecedented experiment in crafting a bottom-up, “crowd-sourced” constitution; while two-thirds of the Irish Constitutional Convention is made up of ordinary citizens. The negative example here is again Hungary, where a new constitution was voted into effect by the dominant party only (which used the constitution to entrench partisan preferences), and, as said above, never put to popular referendum. But using the crisis to consolidate power for one part of society is really just a recipe for prolonging it.

⁵¹ Wolfgang Streeck, *Gekaufte Zeit* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2013).

Not So Much Concluding Thoughts as Further Thoughts

This essay has argued that populism has an inner logic that is visible both in the claims populist political actors put forward and in the practices they adopt when governing. One might say that the essay has also exhibited two rather blatant blind spots: first, it has tacitly taken for granted the existence of an *actual people*, an empirically verifiable number, so to speak. Democratic theory has been struggling with the apparent indeterminacy of ‘the people’ for some time, to put it mildly.⁵² Populists, on the other hand, have an answer ready for the boundary problem.⁵³ Can democratic theory offer a counter-theoretical claim?

Second, the essay has not really explained why populism really does have affinities with totalitarianism, when the latter is understood in a particular way – and yet populists generally tend not officially to deny the legitimacy of liberal democracy and, in practice, shrink from converting a political system into not just something illiberal, but something that actually breaks with the institution of free and fair elections. Is this a historically contingent outcome? No, in the sense that actual totalitarianism – as understood by Lefort – really would collapse the distinction between state and society, and between the symbolic and the real. But more ought to be said about why one does not turn into the other.

⁵² See for instance Sofia Näsström, ‘The Legitimacy of the People’, in: *Political Theory*, vol. 35 (2007), 624-658 and the important account of Paulina Ochoa Espejo, *The Time of Popular Sovereignty: Process and the Democratic State* (Penn State University Press, 2011).

⁵³ Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, ‘The Responses of Populism to Dahl’s Democratic Dilemmas’, in: *Political Studies*

A final thought: this essay has not dealt with the question how to conduct oneself politically vi-a-vis populists. The danger here is that anti-populism becomes structurally like populism: because they wish to exclude, we exclude them. Now, I see no plausible reason that populism should directly be subject to something like militant democracy (party bans, systematic restrictions of free speech, as opposed to criminal law investigations of individual racist speech, etc). But that leaves the question of political, as opposed to legal, strategies.⁵⁴ Let me only say the following for now: anti-populist stances can well go together with a serious engagement with the claims populists raise (including the claim that they, and only they, represent the true people), though of course such approaches can still easily come across as patronizing.

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⁵⁴ A promising approach: Stefan Rummens and Koen Abts, 'Defending Democracy: The Concentric Containment of Political Extremism', in: *Political Studies*, vol. 58 (2010), 649-65.