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Populism: a deflationary view

Maxine Molyneux and Thomas Osborne

Abstract

This paper takes a critical, synoptic view of the current upsurge of populism. Populism, it is argued, has long been a feature of liberal democracies in so far as claims are made for democracy to be as directly expressive as possible of the will of its subjects. Yet populisms are hybrid in form and parasitic on existing political arrangements. What unites them is more to do with what they oppose than what they espouse. Above all, it is the norms of liberalism that are brought into question by populist proponents of direct democracy with their characteristic hostility towards elites, experts and the so-called establishment. In so far as all populisms can be dangerous this lies in the degree to which they oppose the existing norms of liberalism and seek to undermine its moderating institutions. Rather than relying on generic theories of populism to explain contemporary developments, what needs investigation is the degree to which particular populisms prioritize fear over judgement, unqualified assertion over reasoned deliberation and resentment over the moderation of power.

Keywords: populism; liberalism; democracy; fear.

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Too much has been made of populism as if its varieties have, in Jan-Werner Müller's terms, an ineluctable 'inner logic'; as if it were a transcultural and wholly coherent form of political organization, even a kind of political 'regime' or a technology of government akin to 'bureaucracy' or 'totalitarianism'; or some kind of radical alternative to liberal democracy (cf. Lefort, 1986; Müller, 2016, p. 10). But populism is not really a 'thing' at all. It is, rather, an 'effect', a style, a syndrome, a device – or series of devices – involving, to varying degrees and intensities, the myth of direct popular power – a component of politics of different shades. Populism is generically hybrid and parasitic; in myriad forms, sometimes *in extremis*, sometimes not, it has long coexisted with liberalism and democracy. Instead of bemoaning the current populist wave across the globe, we should begin by disaggregating it into its different forms and components, exploring the many ways in which populisms graft onto other kinds of political action, other kinds of political form.

This approach, we suggest, allows us to be more critically discriminating than we might have been had we regarded populism as a single kind of political form or attitude. Populism can certainly be dangerous to liberal democracies. Yet too often this ascription of dangerousness is either applied to populism *tout court*, or is scarcely more discriminatingly applied within a left/right dichotomy, where leftist populism would be 'progressive', rightist reactionary. Rather, we argue that the key to understanding populism relies crucially on existing institutional forms and traditions that are in place – what Machiavelli called the given 'subject-matter' – the *subietto* – of political conduct (Machiavelli, 1976 [1532], p. 27). Where populism grafts onto institutional forms that are already of an anti-liberal, a weakly liberal or authoritarian kind, then populism will take much of its colour from that situation. When populism is grafted onto traditions that are connected to and support liberal traditions and institutions – whether of left or right – it can be a dynamic, creative and positively disruptive force. Of further obvious import is whether what is at stake is an oppositional populism or a populism of office, a populism that has taken power. But in whatever case we are considering, our deflationary approach does not imply a sanguine attitude to political events; it implies, rather, empiricism and realism. We are deflationary about the concept, but the varying manifestation of populism in actual political forms should lead us, in some cases anyway, to be far from deflationary. When populism is combined with intolerance, nativism, bigotry – as it so often, though not always, is – then obviously populism can be classified from a liberal perspective as being dangerous. But often these aspects are not just down to populism but down to more prosaic factors: racism, opportunism or fear, for example. Most obviously we need a clear sense of the contextual variation of diverse populisms. Such an approach will complicate things rather than simplify them, but that is not necessarily a bad thing if it can help us adjust our expectations towards a principled kind of realism rather than either a naïve utopianism or an abject hopelessness.

Varieties of populism

Populism is promiscuous in that it appears across the entire political spectrum and can apply to figures as different from each other as Vladimir Putin, Beppe Grillo, Jeremy Corbyn or Boris Johnson. Those who want to say that populism is one thing typically find themselves reducing it to one variety, or one element, often one of a rightist kind. But then the term itself becomes, arguably, redundant – since one might as well simply invoke rightist politics rather than populism *per se*. On the other hand, generalizing views tend not to capture all populisms. For instance, populism is not to be identified necessarily with a resistance to pluralism, as does Jan-Werner Müller (2016) in his analysis. This, again, is to assume that populism is an inherently rightist phenomenon. In the United Kingdom Corbynism surely has a very strong populist component, and yet in many ways its pluralist credentials are more pronounced than those of its opponents. However, we do agree with Müller that, in fact, in many of its manifestations populism is more moral than political (Müller, 2016, pp. 19–20). But it is not just about a moralizing attitude towards ‘the people’, though populism is that – it is about a moralizing attitude towards the realities of power. This is the notion that the people (however determined in each case) have a moral sovereignty that it is the duty of representative politics to express as directly as possible. Politics, so far as populists are concerned, has to translate the people’s will in as pristine and *unmediated* a form as possible. Indeed, what populists have in common is really a moral idea – that political opinion can be expressed, so far as possible, without the mediation of institutions.

Populisms, in this sense, are united more in what they reject than in what they espouse; and what they reject, or at least what they are generically suspicious of, is any idea of mediated power. In effect they espouse what Wilhelm Hennis called the ‘principle of identity’: the idea that governed and governors could and should form a kind of expressive unity (Hennis, 2009, pp. 41; cf. Schmitt, 1985 [1923], pp. 26–27). Identitarianism is not about a politics of identity; rather it is the myth, in fact, of direct power. Different populisms can be assessed, in this sense, by the extent to which they demand power without mediation – in other words by the extent to which they want to collapse the political into the moral. Obviously, not all populisms reject representative institutions to the same extent, and it is important to note that none reject representation completely. This is not least what separates populism from fascism. Fascist leaders want to militarize the social body and usually to expunge existing forms of representation altogether. Populisms, in contrast, tend to be parasitic upon liberalism and representative institutions. In giving power ‘back’ to the people, populisms seek to capture existing arrangements to do so. In so far as Corbynism is populist, it seeks to restore representative institutions to its popular base, not to expunge them altogether. Populism then, as various writers have pointed out, is more like a ‘syndrome’ that varies in intensity rather than a single thing (Laclau, 2005, p. 14; Shils, 1996 [1956]; Worsley in Ionescu & Gellner, 1969, p. 244). And this is why one can

see elements of populism in many political movements that are not simply populist as such: for instance, in the politics of Tony Blair or Margaret Thatcher.

In this sense, populism is – as Müller has argued – a ‘shadow’ on democracy, but not necessarily a dark one that blights its host (Müller, 2016, p. 11). Likewise, contra Rosanvallon (2008), who describes populism as a ‘pathology’ of democracy, it is expressive or at least symptomatic of the democratic ideal itself – that the people should rule, that the people have sovereignty. Here is the dilemma with which Rousseau damned liberalism, and which Benjamin Constant turned into the paradox that was constitutive of it. Liberal democracies always have to balance the demands of expression – what we could call the identitarian principle – with the realities of political mediation, representation and governance through institutions. Nevertheless, the prioritization of the people is, in itself, a moral one. The idea of popular rule is not given, it has to be *made* political; and that is where populisms have tended to clash with more liberal conceptions of governance, as if populist demands have to be *translated* into politics. This also explains why populists tend to be hostile to the existing rules of the game. Populists of all stripes tend to despise what they regard as the establishment, politics as usual. This is a principled opposition in the sense that ‘establishments’ by definition are political phenomena that, so far as populists are concerned, contradict the identitarian principle, leading at best to compromise, and at worse to betrayal of the moral integrity of the people’s will. Populists would rather stay on the moral ground – not necessarily the ‘high’ moral ground of course. This is why so much populism can seem anti-political, making demands that go beyond what generally seem to be the limits of political attainability. In this sense, it is not only establishments that populisms are wary of but also, more generically, just *politics* in the sense of the rules of the game. Populisms typically embody a moral conception of politics.

Our argument is that in studying populisms we need to take special notice of the means by which demands of a politically moralistic nature get translated into the political environment. What are the relays between the moral valorization of some or other kind of ‘people’ and politicization, political action, political power? First of all, of course, peoples themselves have to be made; they have to have some kind of conception of themselves. There are many forms of such recognition; the only important point to make is that the people is not a given but is always a construction. We hardly need to go into the voluminous and much-cited literature on this topic (Weber, 1976; Anderson, 2016; and so on). Nor do we need to show that this construction will often rely on some perceived sense of wrong that generates resentment towards those who supposedly connive in prolonging it – outsiders, migrants, minorities, elites, the establishment. This is why nativism is such a common factor in right-wing populisms. Nativists know who the people are because they are the ones who are already there. Mexicans, Muslims – these are not native. But while nativism is a common aspect of populism, it is not essential to it. The people always has an ‘outside’. Even if this is not posed in terms of ethnicity, race or other kinds of exclusion, it can take the form of conspiratorial thinking, an enemy within,

those who betray us, the elites, the establishment and so on. Populism can of course often embrace both types.

Populism's suspicion of institutions, and the identitarian principle that is common to all variants, renders it particularly susceptible to fantasies of personal leadership. It is leaders not institutions that express the popular will. But leaders do not only lead the people; in many ways they constitute them. Hence the volatility of the fortunes of populisms. When their leaders die, resign or disappear, populisms often quite suddenly falter. Leaders are typically key to the politicization of populisms. They establish themselves as relays between the moral purity of some or other popular will and the actual political realization of populist hopes. Populist leaders are invariably 'doers' not mere thinkers – hence the anti-intellectual character of so many populisms. This is Donald Trump saying he is going to build a wall, an act of semiosis which turns the moral rejection of outsiders – in this case Mexican migrants – into an index of political decisiveness. The point is not so much that a wall will or will not be built; the point is to signal that the leader gets things done, that the leader can do it.

But not all leaderships are the same. Corbynite hagiology is a long way, of course, from Trumpist gung-ho bullshiness. And of course leadership styles follow existing traditions. Latin American populism has been described as originating in the *caudillo* tradition of the strong leader that brooks no nonsense (Ionescu & Gellner, 1969, p. 33). Yet Peronism's golden couple Evita and Juan Domingo highlight another trope of populisms, the rhetoric of affect. Eva Perón's particular variant was to speak of her 'love' for the people, describing herself as the heart of Peronism, her husband as the 'head' in emotive declarations that moved mass demonstrations to tears. This sort of populist trope would be impossible in the world of Donald Trump, one imagines. But these differences are not just matters of individual style, they are down to Machiavellian 'subject-matter'. Where there are political traditions of authoritarianism, then populism will unsurprisingly be coloured by those traditions. On the other hand, in state formations with more liberal traditions, populism will more likely tend to promote those who are seen as ordinary, sometimes with bizarre effects.

At stake here are differing rationalities of trust, and different ways of signaling to voters that the leader is 'one of them' (Manin, 1997, p. 130). Even Margaret Thatcher was not an oddity in this respect: she famously claimed to run the nation's finances as a housewife would, with the home in Thatcher's analogy constituting its moral heart. Jeremy Corbyn is presented as ordinary, well-meaning, quite simple and good, and even – arguably – Boris Johnson's buffoonery makes him, in effect, an example of what we could call the idiocy of power in democratic societies. Theodor Adorno wrote famously of Adolf Hitler that he combined the qualities of King Kong with those of a suburban barber – the absurd little man condensed into a super-hero (Adorno, 1991, p. 122). Of course, idiocy works in different ways: Jeremy Corbyn is appreciated by his supporters as a simple man, a man of principle, and so not like an ordinary

politician of the establishment. Corbyn's style has a kind of anti-charismatic quality that gives him, paradoxically, an odd kind of charisma for his following. Whether he is actually ordinary or not is another matter. Nevertheless, idiocy effects are, we suggest, quite real. Populist trust can be generated by idiocy in that such a personal style is both an individualizing yet also a hard-to-fake device for signalling trust on the lines of 'if I am this absurd (or, if Trump, this out of line), I must be genuine'. The ancient Greek notion of idiocy distinguished it from the rationality of the citizen; in this sense, the idiot is not a fool but a genuine, ordinary person – perhaps one who sees through the tired conventions of politics. Churchill's popularity no doubt relied on similar effects; and a certain shared idiocy is perhaps the only area in which we should be prepared to countenance Johnson's own self-acclaimed parallels with Churchill. In any case, we may be in need of a comparative historiography of leadership styles that would throw light on the varieties of populism in the context of differing political traditions.

All this suggests that in spite of common factors – the identitarian principle, the role of leaders rather than institutions, the people against the establishment – the atlas of populism is one of more or less endless variety. Populism has no prototypes. There is no quintessential form of it from which we can deduce the rest. It cannot be derived, for instance, from any historical essence. Yet the longevity of the populist idea in history suggests that it is ineluctably tied, to various degrees, to democratic reality itself. Populism is as ancient as democracy. Thucydides's description of the demagogue Cleon, for instance, has plenty of resonances in subsequent history (2013, p. 183 ff.; cf. Osborne, 2017). Cleon loathed the Athenian nobility – they were the elite, the establishment. Against the wishes of the ruling nobility – the establishment in effect – he persuaded the Athenians in 427 BC to order the slaughter of the inhabitants of Mytilene who had defected from their protection. The Athenians in the Assembly then had second thoughts and decided not to carry out the slaughter. But Cleon, in full demagogic spate, persuaded them to stick to the original, ruthless plan – and over a thousand Mytilene citizens were executed. The account in Thucydides is useful because it is not simply dismissive of populism; Thucydides seems to dislike Cleon intensely, but he does not seem that surprised by him, nor particularly alarmed by the fact that he is a demagogue. Rather, for Thucydides, his sort just seems to be symptomatic of democracy itself.

If the ancient Greek example registers the beginnings of a chronology for populism, it nonetheless offers no prototype of it. Nor are there prototypes of it in the modern era. Modern populism – the word as well as the entity – emerged in Russia and the United States in the nineteenth century, and in both cases it was, broadly speaking, an agrarian movement. This led some writers to see something essentially agrarian in populism (think Frank L. Baum's *Wonderful Wizard of Oz*). In Russia, the populist moment was led by an urban *narodnik* intelligentsia, whereas in the United States the Populist Party retained its rural roots. Both of the original modern populisms were recognizable as something of the left, the Russian version anti-capitalist, the

US version hostile above all to the urban intelligentsia, railroad and banking interests (Kazin, 1998). Yet it goes without saying that subsequent history has hardly demonstrated that populism is exclusively a phenomenon of the left. Each was populist in so far as what was valorized was a hard-working, virtuous people pitted against what was regarded as a treacherous, self-interested elite. But Czarism and the Republican hierarchy were hardly kindred foe any more than the average Russian peasant was equivalent to a Colorado smallholder.

The lack of a common political core to – or a basic prototype of – populism is further highlighted by probably the most extended series of cases in the modern era: twentieth-century Latin America (Conniff, 1999). Unlike earlier forms of populism (the Peruvian APRA founded in 1924 being a partial exception), Latin American versions, appearing later, tended to be urban in character. Such figures as Vargas and Perón drew their support from urban workers, some of whom came from recent rural stock, and from sections of the military, though they themselves could count as middle class. Populism characterized all sorts of Latin American oppositional movements, but it became a signal feature of government for some 20 years from the 1940s, the so-called ‘classic’ period of Latin American corporatist-populism. In Argentina, Perón created a form of nationalist-authoritarian syndicalism, variants of which could be found at different times under very different conditions in Brazil and Chile, and Peru in 1968 (among others). Even when led by military men, these populisms were more often than not allied to some democratic institutions, such as elections and parliaments in those countries where these already had some implantation. While these governments were often supported by the left, they have frustrated attempts to characterize them in terms of conventional left–right divisions. In some cases, as with Peronism, they have combined elements from across the political spectrum. Peronism’s long history both in opposition and in power saw it pragmatically aligned at different times with leftist and rightist policies, governing with varying degrees of authoritarian and democratic principles, pursuing with equal vigour neoliberal and heterodox economic policies. Whatever their complexion, Latin American populisms sought to sustain popular support through redistributive policies, with, in the case of Peronism, remarkably durable effect.

While never far from the region’s politics since the heyday of classic populism, populism in office reappears again in the so-called Pink Tide of the new millennium that brought leftist or left-of-centre governments to power. While these later ‘neo-populists’ shared elements of their rhetoric with their post-war predecessors, promising action and radical change to favour the poor, drawing on and reinvigorating nationalist sentiments and pursuing more heterodox and redistributive economic policies, these commonalities were less telling than their differences of governance, forms of state, popular base and policy. Hugo Chavez, Evo Morales and Rafael Correa, respectively of Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, may all have claimed to be twenty-first-century socialists, but theories seeking to amalgamate them into a single expression of populism,

whether on the basis of structural determinants or rhetoric, remain at best superficial.

If Latin American populisms in power, in so far as we can generalize about them at all, seem to be exemplary of a particular kind of statist populism, they should not necessarily be seen as a paradigm case. Populisms are all hybrid. Conditioning factors for such hybridity include most obviously the context in which the populism in question is enacted; for instance, whether what is at issue is a populism, left or right, of opposition and resistance – ‘outsider’ populism – or the populism of office. Perón in the 1940s, Putin and to an extent Erdoğan today represent a populism of office whereby their official status is deployed to generate and manipulate popular support, whereas they were not exactly populist leaders before taking office, certainly not in Putin’s case. Of course, outsider populism can turn into the populism of office – in the Russian context, the career of Boris Yeltsin, for example – but then taking office is never without risks in terms of distorting or transforming one’s very sources of support. The debate over the direction of the Trump presidency is indicative of this. There are those who see Trump as a threat to US democracy itself, whilst others are more sanguine, arguing that the entrenched institutions of US liberal democracy will function as a bulwark to raw populism in power (Singh, 2017).

Populism and liberal democracy

Now, whether or not this kind of deflationary view of Trump overestimates the resilience of US liberal democracy is of course an empirical matter (cf. Runciman, 2016). On the other hand, if Trump’s regime descends – as seems perfectly possible – into outright authoritarianism this will not be simply down to its populism but down to the illiberal intolerance of Trump and the fragility of institutions – representative and legal – to counteract that intolerance. No ‘theory’ of populism would help us in this respect. But that is because, in any case, populism is too variegated to be susceptible to theory of any but the ‘thinnest’ kind. Theories tend to commit their proponents to one-sided normative views of populism – either that it is pathological, or in the case of some that it is a useful corrective to the narrow rules of the game of liberal democracy (Laclau, 1997, 2005). In either case, populism and liberal democracy are held to be terms that are essentially external to each other. Leverage for the idea that populism and liberal democracy cannot coexist – that populism is a negative shadow or pathology of liberal democracy – takes force from a problematic tradition in political theory that dissociates liberalism and democracy altogether.

In contrast, we argue that we need to think not in terms of any absolute contradiction between populism and liberal democracy but in terms of how – empirically – democracy, liberalism and populism operate together and at times against each other. If anything, what we are seeing today in the global spread of populisms of all kinds is not so much the growth of some kind of

homogeneous if amorphous wave of populism but a loss of confidence in the principles and institutions of liberal democracy, played out at different intensities and in different ways. It is as if the populist side of democracy has taken sides against its liberal side. But democracy, of course, has always been torn in this respect. Political philosophers and theorists are used to the idea that liberalism and democracy represent an uneasy partnership (Bobbio, 1987). There is no particular reason for the demos to be liberal; on the contrary, the demos can be brutal, reactionary and exclusionary (Mann, 2005; Schmitt, 1985 [1923], p. 9). And it is true that liberalism in much political theory has been as much about restricting the passions of the demos as about promoting them. Enlightenment political theory – Montesquieu, Hume – regarded the masses as intemperate and emotional; government was to provide moderation from these tendencies. Indeed moderation here meant not some kind of middle ground but something more like a system of counter-balances against ‘enthusiasm’, whether of peoples or princes. The principle of representation has been crucial to liberalism in this context. Representation moderates power, limits passions. For Benjamin Constant representation was the centrepiece of a liberal order. Here he was echoing Hume and his insistence that ‘effects of democracy without a representative’ were ‘tumult and sedition’ followed inevitably by despotism (Hume, 1994 [1777], p. 16).

But it is a mistake to assume a radical disjunction between liberal institutions and populist passion. As Constant also stressed, modern liberty needs the passions to energize itself in the first place (Constant, 1988a [1819], p. 327; Holmes, 1984). Constant’s point was not that ancient participatory models of liberty were completely dead, rather that they were transformed and in any case were not sufficient in the context of the growth of modern privatism and individualism. It is possible to imagine democracy without liberalism, but not liberalism without democracy. Central to both is the ethos of equal treatment and equality of citizenship if not necessarily of power and status. Moreover, liberalism is the most equitable form of meeting basic demands of legitimation in the predominantly secular circumstances of political modernity (Williams, 2007, p. 7). As Shklar (1998) argued, liberalism and democracy, if not exactly joined at the hip, are certainly in some kind of marriage of convenience. Nevertheless, given what we termed Rousseau’s problem, democracy is arguably as much in need of liberalism as the latter is in need of the former. There is no clear way in which the will of the people can be realized, assuming – as Rousseau did – that direct democracy was impossible except in very small states. Public choice theory goes further to claim – broadly on the basis of Condorcet’s paradox – that there is, in any case, no such thing as the demos: democracies require elections, and elections sort voting choices non-transitively; in other words, majorities on particular questions do not exist (Riker, 1982). In this sense, there is no such thing as ‘we, the people’. Some political theorists, such as Nadia Urbinati, have claimed, quite plausibly, that in fact liberal institutions are a better approximation to the will of the demos than is populism or any form of direct democracy, that – via dissemination of all sorts of practices

and norms of political judgement – indirect democracy expresses popular sovereignty better than does the populist ideal of direct, identitarian democracy (Urbinati, 2006).

Of course, most populists do in fact accept the representative principle in some form or other (Müller, 2016, p. 25). Yet the logic of populism means that most would adhere, more or less, to the doctrine of representation as delegation, by which representatives are there to express exactly what their constituents want them to express. In contrast we have, most famously, the Edmund Burke of the Address to the Electors of Bristol, stating that representation is in fact a trust, that representatives are elected to serve the *salus populi* and not any particular constituency. The trust model leaves it to the conscience of representatives as to how they vote. As David Hume saw over two centuries ago, however, all democratic representative systems have to be, in effect, a combination of both these principles, and the long-standing debate between them underestimates the extent to which this is always a matter of give-and-take and compromise. Representation in liberal democracies is always a matter of a certain moderation between delegation and trust, between, as it were, the principles of democracy and liberalism. To begin with, an election is an opportunity to assess the merits, or not, of a representative on matters of delegation. But more generally, it is implausible that the representatives of modern political systems might be unaware of bodies of opinion in their constituencies and, no doubt precisely with the prospect of elections in mind, seek to accommodate them so far as that is possible.

Of course this is something of a dialectical process whereby parties pitch ideas to constituencies in the hope of resonating with their concerns. Political argument requires parties to focus debate, to reduce complexity on the wide array of issues that can confront us in political life; in doing so they necessarily need to appeal to particular emotional as well as rational constituencies, indeed to particular constituencies – workers, the elderly, etc. – as opposed to others. But liberal principles tend to lean on procedural norms, discursive norms and norms of recruitment that can conflict with such populist effects. Or rather, if liberalism is procedure, populism is affect. Procedurally, liberalism refers itself to the rule of law, to equality of treatment, to norms of justice that are relatively deracinated from the claims of particular communities such that liberal politics can appear to be separated from those it aims to represent. Hence, the populist mantra of elites that are separate from the people, even though not much trouble is generally taken to investigate the extent to which representatives really do constitute anything like an elite. For the populists, they are elites by virtue of the fact that they are part of the liberal system, the so-called establishment; it is not a serious or refutable sociological claim but a *sine qua non* of the populist position.

From the viewpoint of populism, liberal norms can be deeply frustrating. And indeed populism is not always without reason in its scepticism about liberal political norms. As Carl Schmitt demonstrated in his symptomatic exposé of the contradictions of parliamentary democracies, liberal representatives tend to

chatter to each other, or tend to be seen to be people who merely chatter with each other (Schmitt, 1985 [1923]). The etymology of 'parliament' must have been at the forefront of Schmitt's mind here, and no doubt Chantal Mouffe is right to point out that there is insight in the populist position on liberalism (Mouffe, 2005; cf. Müller, 2016, p. 8) – that the rules of the game tend to pitch political argument only towards the centre at the expense of other ideas, other solutions, which is not the least of the reasons that liberal democracies tend to be somewhat passionless environments. Populism engages its opponents with nothing so much as passion, not as an irrationalist option but with what seems more often than not to be a deliberate alternative to unimpassioned liberal argument. After all, it is difficult to be passionate about liberal democracies. They are generically suboptimal in terms of their outcomes; they always lead to disappointment if simply because all decisions are products of negotiation and compromise rather than being expressions of a popular will, and because party-governance often means that leadership tends to be of the second-best variety (Osborne, 2014). Populism, therefore, is something like an inevitable symptom of the innate limits that are constitutive of liberal democracies.

Populism is dangerous

Populism, we have argued in a deflationary spirit, is an inevitable and not necessarily a wholly undesirable feature of political life in liberal democracies. Yet a deflationary approach does not mean that populism is not a problem. If it is not a pathology or a darkened shadow this does not mean that – empirically speaking – populism cannot be dangerous for democracies. It is a matter of the extent to which this or that populism wishes to assert its identitarian claims and how much it is willing to compromise, or not, with the existing rules of the political game. Populisms, unless moderated by other forces, tend to a Manichean approach to political life. The complexities of politics are reduced to an either/or dilemma; you are either with us or against us, part of the elite or in sympathy with the establishment. Solutions tend to be similarly stark: build a wall to keep out Mexicans, leave the European Union. This is why the referendum is the perfect – and deeply anti-liberal – instrument for political populism. The Manicheanism of extreme forms of populism, whether of right or left, tends to make them both hyper-political and, in some ways, anti-political. Populism can be hyper-political in terms of enthusiasm, the generation of strong passions and commitments; equally, it can be anti-political in the sense of a refusal of compromise, a resistance to engaging in the give-and-take of politics, a resistance to acting in terms of what Weber called the ethics of responsibility as opposed to the ethics of conviction. So often populism actually seems to bypass politics-as-usual, as with Donald Trump's notorious twitter rants. It has an energy that is surplus to the problems in hand, and in spite of the get-things-done ethos it tends to be more often than not about the release of emotion than getting anything done.

Manicheanism tends to be self-perpetuating; it leads to a spiralling rather than a regulation of fear. Populisms, unless moderated, are dangerous not least because they are reductive about fear. Of course, fear is a normal part of political – and other kinds of – existence; but populism makes fear, as it were, prior to reason; it builds makeshift reasons around its fears rather than basing its fears on reason. Populism in this sense is passion draped in *ad hoc* reasoning, rather than the proper impassioned reasoning of politics. Manicheanism and the fundamentalism of fear are connected. Any political psychology of populism would have to consider its tendency to paranoid structures. Populisms, especially but not exclusively those of the right, project the other as entirely adverse in a Manichean way; the European Union, Muslims, Mexicans, foreign states. Those who are criticized are all equally beyond the populist pale, not as political opponents but as enemies.

Of course, it is not particularly novel to state this Manichean element to populism. But it leads to an interesting realization; namely, that we need a much more nuanced understanding of how fear plays out in political life. One step towards this would be to distinguish fear from caution, a distinction that might be somewhat parallel to that between uncertainty and risk in economics and the sciences of probability. The distinction, expressed in this form, is doubtless too sharp but hopefully at least indicative of a real difference. Liberalism sees itself, we could argue, as typically centred upon the politics of caution: if the government does A or B, then the consequence will be C or D. Liberal political discourse does not consist of friend–enemy relations. Carl Schmitt was right about that, but wrong about the implications (cf. Schmitt, 1985 [1923]). Liberal politics – parliamentarism in Schmitt's argot – is indeed about discussion; but the jargon of friends and enemies, contra Schmitt, is best left to situations of warfare. Politics is constituted, in any case, not by decisionism and the reductive contrast of friends and enemies but by debates between opponents in an argument (see Williams, 2007). One is wary of opponents, but, since they share the rules of the game, one does not exactly fear them in the way that one fears one's enemies, for enemies are seen as being outside the rules of the game altogether. Instead, the liberal view would be that one cautions against the views, and policies, of one's opponents. The basis of the distinction between government and opposition is between a body that proposes and a body that cautions over what will occur if the government's proposals go ahead.

Political caution relies on fear to the extent that it specifies future outcomes that may be undesirable. But a wholesale politics of fear is different; fear is always more than the sum of whatever is cautioned. Fear, in that sense, plays on ignorance, it is fear of the unknown. Like uncertainty, populist fear is not always specific as to what its object is. This, paradoxically, gives populism a fundamentalist quality; it is the unknowability of the fear that makes it so unarguable. Precisely because fear is expansive and amorphous its indices have to be both concrete – foreigners, elites – and mobile. Boris Johnson did not exactly 'caution' about Turkey's possible membership of the European Union so

much as invoke it as a fear. Then once the point is made, and even if it is refuted, the campaign moves onto other things, other fears. This is not least why to claim that populism is a form of 'post-fact' politics is in fact a little misleading in the sense that the facts are not what is at issue (cf. Thompson, 2016); it is not the facts that matter, but the manipulation of fear. When populists enunciate a fear, then they have told the truth, whatever the actual facts. For facts belong to caution, and the populist is not playing the political game of caution. Moreover, populist fear is unidirectional: the fear is generated by an extraneous other. It is a zero-sum game between the forces of good (the people, however defined) and bad (the elite, the establishment, etc.). Liberalism has a more multi-faceted, complex notion of fear; in cautioning against one danger, one always runs the risk of generating others. Liberalism, quite properly, is afraid of fear; in some ways it is the political reflexivity of fear, attempting to limit fear so far as possible in order to promote the values of autonomy (Shklar, 1998). For instance, in fighting terrorism, one has to caution the public to be vigilant, but such cautioning, if it descends to outright fear-mongering, becomes counter-productive. Indeed, it plays into the hands of the terrorists' agenda, which is, precisely, to spread fear. For liberalism, fear is itself always something to be cautioned against since it is not a 'transparent' emotion but has a political inertia of its own.

We have said that populism is dangerous in so far as it can spread fear. Properly political populisms may be dangerous in this sense. But there is another kind of dangerousness attached to other, less political, styles of populism – that, paradoxically, of irrelevance. Populisms are adept at generating moral indignation. This is particularly so of populisms of the left. Corbynism would be a case in point here. It remains largely an oppositional, moral movement attempting to gravitate towards a political one. This does not mean that it has no political purchase, far from it. But there is a difference between a social movement and a political party. Perhaps the greatest *political* achievement of Corbynism was the adoption by Theresa May of elements or at least the rhetorics of a labour policy. Populisms can influence politics, but in many cases they do not *do* politics. This is why very often populist movements fade from view just as they seem to be at their most successful. They are subject to capture. The US Populist Party of the 1890s signalled a certain degree of ideological success by being subsumed into the Democratic Party. A similar fate with regard to the UK Tories might very well await UKIP. In France, politicians on the right seek to don some of the clothing of the Front National. It is as if there is an implicit choice between effervescence and dynamism outside politics, or being captured by politics, being so to speak subject to the moderations of politics.

Populisms into power

There is no such thing as pristine populism; populisms always have to adapt with regard to accession to office and accommodation with power. Here we

are invoking something broadly equivalent to Max Weber's routinization problem (Weber, 1968, p. 1121 ff.). Weber famously argued that charisma is subject to problems of routinization when transferred from a principle of ideational effervescence to a principle of rule. Routinization, for him, meant that the force of charisma tended to decline when exposed to the mundane rigours of office. But routinization is also something that needs to be achieved: a transfer has to be made from the indulgencies of protest to the responsibilities or at least the challenges of power. How do populisms function when they are in power? Are there, as it were, rules of translation from populism to power that can be cited in this respect?

As a prelude to this, we might draw some inspiration from Weber and make a distinction between populism *per se* and a specific variety of it, what we referred to earlier as the populism of office. As Weber argued, there is such a thing as the charisma of office, where charisma derives as much from the holding of office itself as from the adulation of a following (Weber, 1968, pp. 1139–1141). Putin or Erdoğan's populism seems as much derived from their status in office as from any prior build-up of populist support. Putin was in the KGB, Erdoğan was a semi-professional footballer before becoming mayor of Istanbul but was hardly known as a populist demagogue as opposed to a pragmatic if potentially Islamist fixer-politician. We could say something parallel in terms of Perón; his populist appeal derived originally from a period at the Argentine Labour ministry in the early 1940s, although ejection from office in 1945 also helped his profile as man of the people rather than the established powers. Office aided Perón's populist appeal, as did raising wages and giving workers rights. But Evita added charisma: self-described with some accuracy as 'from the humble people' she claimed that she knew their suffering.

When, as in the cases of Erdoğan and Putin, popular appeal serves to consolidate authoritarian rule, this has much to do with the absence of a strong, balancing liberal tradition, together with the deployment of techniques for capturing the existing state apparatus (Müller, 2016, p. 44). But to achieve the latter, account needs to be made of the existing available material of politics. Populisms, as we stressed earlier, have to adapt, at least initially, to the context of the relative presence or absence of liberal norms and institutions. This is Machiavellian *subietto* again. The less liberalism that is already there, the more scope for authoritarianism. On the other hand, if populists can adapt those institutions and norms themselves in directions favourable to their own ends, then they can to an extent displace the existing political culture. Silvio Berlusconi's extensive control of the Italian media allowed him to 'de-liberalize' Italian political society and to control the agenda for himself. Putin and Erdoğan represent comparable examples. Independent media are a liberal institution, and obviously a threat to populisms; capturing the media, or in Trump's case attempting to discredit it, can be integral to changing the rules of the game.

More generally, there are undoubtedly cases that work in the other direction, where office dilutes rather than augments the effervescences of populism. Syriza's move from opposition movement to government would be an

obvious case in point here. In states with strong traditions of liberal democracy we might expect this sense of adaptation to be even more marked. We should include preparation for office in our remit, as well as actual succession. The Front National in France has under Marine le Pen obviously attempted to adapt in a more liberal direction – liberal in the sense of playing more within the rules of the game, not in the sense of an expansive tolerance. This is not just a matter of leadership style. Under Marine le Pen, the Front National is a different kind of organization than it was under her father's control; it engages with the political sphere in a different way and is in some respects less populist. But the one step back is in the interests of several steps forward. Due to the structure of the electoral system for the French presidency, and since le Pen cannot hope to gain the kinds of media control enjoyed by Berlusconi, Putin or Erdoğan, some adaptation to liberal norms and values has been imperative (Carpentier, 2015).

However, accommodation has its perils. In the case of Syriza in Greece, translation into power – after an initial honeymoon period – has occurred more or less entirely at the expense of the original populist effect. Syriza has had to conform to the rules of the game in the form of the European Union's apparatus of financial and, by extension, political regulation. Syriza was a populist movement that has become a regular, liberal political party and in the process lost most of its passionate oppositional effervescence. Something similar, one imagines, would have to happen to Corbynism were it ever to hope to accede to power. Another strategy, however, is for populist outsiders to seize control of existing parties. This is what Donald Trump did with the Republican Party, and the example seems to be more or less unique. Opponents of Corbyn of course regard his elevation to the Labour leadership as being something of a coup, but the example is quite different. Corbyn represents a form of London metropolitan leftism that has a long-standing tradition within the UK Labour Party, but there is no parallel in the US case. The Tea Party was of course a vibrant, populist – and influential – wing of the Republican Party; but Trump was not a product of the Tea Party, and the Tea Party is not Momentum. Trump genuinely – almost accidentally (one suspects largely as a result of the weakness and indecision of his opponents, combined with the idiosyncrasies of the US primary system) – captured the Republican Party for himself. And yet, quite aside from populism, which was only part of Trump's strategy, there is a political category that might fit this situation well. This is the category of usurpation, put forward by Constant, above all in contrast to despotism. There are despotic aspects to both Putin and Erdoğan, no doubt; but Trump made use of the existing apparatus of liberal governance to further his ends. 'Despotism', writes Constant, 'banishes all forms of liberty; usurpation needs these forms in order to justify the overturning of what it replaces; but in appropriating them it profanes them' (Constant, 1988b [1815], p. 95). In other words, populism in this kind of context, at least, is parasitic precisely on the liberal apparatuses of government that it purportedly opposes. And Constant adds tellingly: 'Despotism stifles freedom of the press;

usurpation parodies it' (Constant, 1988b [1815], p. 96). Populism in such contexts is democracy more or less as farce, but in paradoxically requiring liberal democratic institutions for its sustenance it is less likely to want to suppress them altogether.

Populists seek to build movements rather than work with parties, though they might try to establish new ones; it is rare for populists to capture existing parties. As a rule, parties are caging devices. They use populism, but they also tend to restrict its scope, they channel it for electoral – as opposed to effervescently populist – ends. Typically they bring what has captured them further to the centre ground. Other examples where populists have captured parties are really quite different from the Trump example, and the contrast reveals the weakness rather than the strength behind Trump's situation. Max Weber, in a brilliant analysis, showed how charismatic rule and bureaucratic proceduralism could be bedfellows in politics, describing Gladstone, for instance, as a 'plebiscitary dictator' able to stand above parliament and, having captured the party machine, speak directly to the masses (Weber, 1994 [1918], p. 343). But in this case, who really captured whom? Gladstone captured the party, but then the party captured him as well: a case, then, of mutual capture. And Tony Blair or Margaret Thatcher would be similar cases. Each captured their party and then established a formidable party machine to promote them; but the party machine existed at a level of organization deeper than merely their personalities. Both were expendable. The Trump case is intriguing in relation to this. It is arguable whether Trump has captured or simply bypassed the Republican party; or alternatively whether the Republican Party will be able to capture *him*. One suspects, given the strength of the Republicans across the board (Senate, House of Representatives and Supreme Court), that it will. More intriguing, still, is the extent – if at all – to which Trump will be constrained not just by the US constitutional order but by the liberal norms of politics themselves. As we have pointed out, liberal democracies are not unities but strange amalgams of populist affects, democratic norms and liberal forms of proceduralism. It is an uneasy mix, and the next four years in the United States will be a kind of natural experiment in terms of their on-going interrelations.

Concluding remarks

We have sought to downplay some of the more essentialist diagnoses of the populist moment, without for all that necessarily allaying any of the concerns that have been voiced about the recent wave of anti-liberal sentiment across the globe. However, we believe that what is to be feared in relation to the various components of this wave of populism is on the one hand highly differentiated since no single movement is alike and, on the other, often not to be related specifically to populism at all. Authoritarian leaders such as Putin or Erdoğan use populism to a greater or lesser extent, but what is to be objected to in what they do is more down to authoritarianism than populism *per se*.

Populism is part of the toolbox, not the central issue. Similarly with Trump, who is a populist – but also obviously enough, yet more importantly, a racist, a misogynist and much else besides. More often than not when the concept of populism is invoked we might be invoking with greater pertinence other phenomena such as authoritarianism, Caesarism, illiberalism, class struggle, political romanticism, racism and so on.

Even asserting that there is a general movement at stake – a wave of populisms – is problematic. Of course one can invoke general causes to explain this apparent wave, and such general causation seems to give the wave itself some kind of salience (Moffitt, 2016). The most obvious causal factors are those associated with globalization. Indeed at a counter-factual level were we to subtract globalization from the political reality of the past few decades we would have seen much less populism. But the key is not what populisms have in common, in this case in terms of causation, but how they play out at a political level; and at this level there is more difference than commonality. Populism is a moral force that manifests itself in a diversity of political expressions. But if it signals anything more widely, it signals something political not moral; above all, it signals that the principle of trust in liberal democracies has become narrowed and curtailed. As Rosanvallon emphasizes, the issue is to do with trust (Rosanvallon, 2008). We live in societies where trust relations have been largely hollowed out in bureaucratic emptiness, where the use of ‘thick concepts’ of moral life is relegated to minorities and the marginalized. The very idea that liberal representation should entail a principle of trust must come under strain in such circumstances. The solution, if there is one, is likely to lead down the road of a widening and diversification not only of democracy but also of liberalism itself rather than an over-emphasis on expunging the perils of populism (cf. Müller, 2016, chapter 3). The relative shallowness of constitutional liberalism in so many respects – the absence of any meaningful separation of powers, the creeping predominance of executive power, the retreat into bureaucratic formalism and political correctness and the lack of confidence in as well as respect for the representative principle – is the major issue here. Populism is certainly a symptom but it is not the only problem.

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