

〈Editorial〉

# Populism in Japan: Fascist, neoliberal, and leftist variants (1)

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## 1. Introduction

Japan appears to have been largely spared from the wave of populism that has hit Europe and the USA with such ferocity the past decade. Western analysts have declared that populism has ‘missed Japan’<sup>1)</sup> and that ‘there is little populism to be found’ in Japan or indeed in East Asia in general.<sup>2)</sup><sup>3)</sup> Japanese political scientists, on the other hand,

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1 Lind, Jennifer (2018) ‘Nationalist in a Liberal Order: Why Populism Missed Japan’, *Asia-Pacific Review* 25(1), pp. 52-74.

2 Klein, Axel (2020) ‘Is there left populism in Japan? The case of Reiwa Shinsengumi’, *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 18(10), p. 1.

3 Hellmann, Olli (2017) ‘Populism in East Asia’, in Rovira Kaltwasser, Cristóbal, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 161-178.

identify several cases of Japanese populism, and many argue that ‘Japan has certainly not been immune to populist phenomena’<sup>4)</sup>. These diverging views are at least in part attributable to diverging understandings of what populism is, but what most scholars can agree on is that ‘Japan has not yet been fully examined in the growing literature on populism’<sup>5)</sup>.

With the above-mentioned disagreement in mind, this article sets out to investigate the cases of Japanese populism that are highlighted in the (mainly Japanese) research literature on populism. While this article adheres to a popular ideational definition of populism, it also adopts the view that populism, like any other political concept, should be treated as a matter of degree rather than an either/or-phenomenon that is either fully present or fully absent. This makes it possible to divide political projects into strong and weak forms of populism, instead of fruitlessly dismissing the populism of politicians and parties that do not perfectly match the definition.

The second part of the article discusses and defines the concept of populism. The third part introduces the first occurrence of what could arguably be labeled Japanese populism: the revolutionary, right-wing idea of a ‘Showa Restoration’ [*shōwa ishin*] in the 1930s. The fourth part explains the long absence of populism during the Cold War. The fifth part analyzes the emergence of neoliberal populism in the 2000s and discusses its causes. A key finding in these empirical sections is that while both the right-wing populism of the 1930s and the neoliberal variant in the 2000s displayed strong antipathy toward the elites, both lacked a strong conviction that the people should be the ultimate source of political power. Both types of populism must therefore be considered relatively weak. The sixth part of the article investigates the recent case of the small left-wing party Reiwa Shinsengumi, and finds that it displays both

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4 Yoshida, Toru (2020) ‘Populism “made in Japan”’: A new species?’, *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 5(3), p. 288; cf. Nakai, Ayumu (2017) “‘Hashimoto gekijō” no dai 1 maku to Nihon no chihō seiji ni okeru popyurizumu’ [The first act of the ‘Hashimoto theatre’ and populism in Japanese local politics]. *Sandai Hōgaku* 50(1/2), p. 352; Mizushima, Jirō (2016) *Popyurizumu to wa Nani ka* [What is Populism?]. Tokyo: Chūōkōron Shinsho, p. 196.

5 Yoshida, ‘Populism “made in Japan”’, p. 289; cf. Klein, ‘Is there left populism in Japan?’, p. 1.

antagonism toward the elites and reverence of the people, treating the latter as the ultimate source of political power. The article therefore argues that Reiwa Shinsengumi not only represents Japan's first case of left-wing populism, but also Japan's first case of strong populism. The seventh and concluding part summarizes the findings in the article.

## 2. What is populism?

As is the case with all major political concepts, there is no consensus on how to define populism. In the literature, populism has been understood as 1) an *ideology* (pitting ordinary people against the elites), 2) a *strategy* (for eliciting popular votes) and 3) a *style* (by which politicians emulate ordinary people).<sup>6)</sup> Due to these rather different conceptualizations, it has become commonplace in scholarly work on populism to point out that populism is a notoriously contested concept. While that certainly still is true, definitions of populism as an ideology seem to have become relatively predominant. Analyzing all articles on populism that appeared in 14 influential political science journals between 1990 and 2015, a group of populism scholars found that as much as 57 percent of all the articles did not present clear definitions of populism.<sup>7)</sup> However, 28 percent of the articles employed ideological definitions of the concept. This was far higher than the other definitional categories ('cultural', 'economic' and 'strategic'). One might therefore conclude that, even if there remains a substantial disagreement

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6 Kunisue, Norito (2016) *Popyurizumu-ka Suru Sekai* [The world's populist turn]. Tokyo: Purejidento-sha, pp. 73-75; cf. Koga, Mitsuo (2020) "'Shuryūka" suru popyurizumu?' [Populism 'turning mainstream?'], in Mizushima, Jirō (ed.) *Popyurizumu to iu chōsen: Kiro ni tatsu gendai demokurashī* [The populist challenge: Modern democracy at a crossroads], Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, pp. 5-9; Mudde, Cas and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 3-4; Kriesi, Hanspeter (2015) 'Populism: Concepts and conditions for its rise in Europe'. *Comunicazione Politica* 16(2), pp. 175-193.

7 Rovira Kaltwasser, Cristóbal, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (2017) 'Populism: An overview of the concept and the state of the art', in Rovira Kaltwasser, Cristóbal, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 11.

about what populism is, definitions that conceive of populism as a form of ideology have secured a comparatively strong position in the literature. Indeed, ideological understandings of populism could be labeled the ‘new mainstream’ in populism research.<sup>8)</sup>

The most authoritative of these ideological definitions is unquestionably that of Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser who define populism as ‘a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’.<sup>9)</sup> This definition will be adopted in this article. The definition aptly captures the polarized worldview of populism, in which the morally good ‘people’ stand in an antagonistic relation to the morally bad ‘elites’, and this moral hierarchy constitute the ideal basis for government of the people, by the people, for the people. Crucially, the authors point out that populism can only be described as a ‘thin-centered ideology’ because, unlike thick-centered ideologies like communism, fascism, ecologism etc., populism does not contain a set of comprehensive presuppositions about how the world works or should work. In fact, apart from its core focus on the struggle between a virtuous people and a corrupt elite, populism is notoriously empty. In order to fill this emptiness with concrete content, populism needs to be combined with other, fuller ideologies, such as the ones mentioned above. This parasitical character of populism is the reason why populism has appeared in so many different variants over the past century and a half, ranging from socialist to neoliberal and from pluralistic to xenophobic. Pure populism is virtually impossible and all forms of populism will need to latch onto other ideologies in order to form a coherent expression of the populist struggle against the elites. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser’s ideational approach has resonated among

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8 Stavrakakis, Yannis, Ioannis Andreadis, and Giorgos Katsambekis (2017) ‘A new populism index at work: identifying populist candidates and parties in the contemporary Greek context’, *European Politics and Society* 18(4), p. 448.

9 Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism*, p. 6. A slightly different version of this definition was used in Mudde, Cas (2004) ‘The populist zeitgeist’, *Government and Opposition* 39(4), p. 543.

Japanese populism scholars, and many recent works in Japanese employ some variant of their populism definition.<sup>10)</sup>

Mudde has argued that ‘distinguishability’ – the ability to distinguish between populism and non-populism – is one of the strong points of his ideational definition.<sup>11)</sup> It is certainly true that precise definitions guide us to a more unified understanding of the phenomena we are debating. However, this article does not agree that it is fruitful to delimit populism only to those political movements that perfectly match a certain definition, and discard the rest as non-populist. A perfect definition does not solve the problem of dissensus because, even if everyone agrees on a set definition, there will still be disagreement about whether the elements of the definition are sufficiently present in the empirical cases under study. It is more helpful to regard the definitions we use as ‘Weberian ideal type[s]’<sup>12)</sup> and judge political projects by their degree of proximity to the ideal. In other words, rather than regarding populism as an either/or-phenomenon, as Mudde tends to do, it should be seen as a matter of degree. In that sense, this article agrees with Ernesto Laclau that,

‘To ask oneself if a movement *is* or *is not* populist is, actually, to start with the wrong question. The question that we should, instead, ask ourselves, is the following: *to what*

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10 Mizushima, Jirō (2020) ‘Hajime ni’ [Foreword], in Mizushima, Jirō (ed.) *Popyurizumu to iu chōsen: Kiro ni tatsu gendai demokurashī* [The populist challenge: Modern democracy at a crossroads]. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, p. vii; Ikemoto, Daisuke (2018) ‘Popyurizumu no chōsen to EU’ [The populist challenge and the EU], in Sasaki, Takeshi (ed.) *Minshusei to popyurizumu* [Democratic governance and populism]. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, p. 19; Shōji, Katsuhiro (2018) *Ōshū popyurizumu: EU bundan wa sakerareru ka* [European populism: Is an EU split avoidable?], Tokyo: Chikuma Shinsho, pp. 29-30; Kunisue, *Popyurizumu-ka Suru Sekai*, pp. 76-77.

11 Mudde, Cas (2017) ‘Populism: An ideational approach’, in Rovira Kaltwasser, Cristóbal, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 34-36.

12 Lindgren, Petter Y. (2015) ‘Developing Japanese populism research through readings of European populist radical right studies: Populism as an ideological concept, classifications of politicians and explanations for political success’, *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 16(4), p. 585.

*extent* is a movement populist?<sup>13)</sup>

Most key concepts in political science – e.g. ‘democracy’, ‘left/right’, ‘power’ – are commonly treated as gradations rather than binary categories that are either present or absent, so why should populism be different? An approach centered on extent enables analyses to divide politicians and parties into categories of strong and weak populism based on their proximity to the definition. For example, if a party displays strong antagonism toward the elites, but make few references to the people as the only legitimate source of political power, its degree of populism would be considered weak (as will be shown, this is the case with most Japanese populism). In the following, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser’s focus on thin-centered ideology will be combined with Laclau’s emphasis on degree. The former is important to understand populism’s chameleon-like ability to adopt various political colors, while the latter is important in order to avoid overly narrow understandings of populism that exclude politicians and parties with clear populist tendencies.

### **2.1. The people, the elites, and how to identify populism**

A couple of important questions remain. Who are the people? Who are the elites? And how do we recognize populism when we see it? The first two questions are intertwined since, in its purest form, populism implicitly or explicitly defines the people in the negative – everyone who is not part of the elites. As Paul Taggart points out, ‘[w]hile the lines of inclusion are fuzzy, populists are usually much clearer about the lines of exclusion<sup>14)</sup>. It is therefore often easiest to start with those whom a given populist identifies as the elites, as these descriptions are almost always far more specific than the descriptions of the people. The elite Other of course differs from case to case, but often the ‘elite’ label is slapped onto corrupt politicians, wasteful bureaucracies,

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13 Laclau, Ernesto (2005) ‘Populism: What’s in a name?’, in Howarth, David (2015) *Ernesto Laclau: Post-Marxism, Populism and Critique*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 161.

14 Taggart, Paul (2000) *Populism*, Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, p. 96.

dishonest media, greedy corporations and rich people, brainwashing teachers, aloof cultural figures, or a combination of these. All variants of populism exclude various elites believed to undermine the democratic rights and the popular will of the sovereign people. In right-wing populism immigrants and minorities are also typically excluded from ‘the people’ for reasons related to culture (they look, think and behave differently) and economy (they increase competition and thus cause wages to plummet). However, the criticism of immigrants and minorities is intimately tied to the criticism of the elites since the latter group is seen as responsible for allowing the damaging influx of the former, or for giving them special legal protections.<sup>15)</sup> Left-wing populism is similar to right-wing populism in its criticism of political and economic elites (which is why some people insist that today’s political fault line is not between left and right, but up and down).<sup>16)</sup> However, left-wing populists differ from their right-wing counterparts in that they often include immigrants and minorities in their conceptualization of ‘the people’ and conversely exclude those they perceive as racists and xenophobes.<sup>17)</sup> Thus, as Mudde points out, it is ‘often clearer [...] who and what populists are *against*’ than who and what they are *for*.<sup>18)</sup>

This is not to say that populists never specify who they regard as the real people. The recent populist-socialist campaigns of Bernie Sanders in the USA and Jeremy Corbyn in the UK primarily focused their appeal on the working class. For the nativist-populist parties that have gained popularity in Europe the past decade, the people is often framed as ethnic Europeans who are proud of their culture and roots. Both of these widely different populist movements claim to represent the ‘people’, but it is clear

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15 De Cleen, Benjamin (2017) ‘Populism and nationalism’, in Rovira Kaltwasser, Cristóbal, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 350.

16 E.g. Koga, ““Shuryūka” suru popyurizumu?”, pp. 20-21; Ostiguy, Pierre (2017) ‘Populism: A socio-cultural approach’, in Rovira Kaltwasser, Cristóbal, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 73-97; Kunisue, Popyurizumu-ka Suru Sekai, p. 38.

17 Mouffe, Chantal (2018) *For a Left Populism*. London and New York: Verso.

18 Mudde, ‘The populist zeitgeist’, p. 546.

from their rhetoric that this seemingly heterogeneous concept is reduced to a far more homogenous part of the whole. This reflects a fact that many populism scholars have pointed out: populist appeals to the people almost always center on a specific segment of the people, while excluding many others.

Finally, it is important to clarify what to look for when identifying populism. The first point to note is that, in line with Laclau's argument about degree, populism should not be thought of as a binary phenomenon that is either present or absent. All forms of democratic politics display populism to a greater or lesser degree. But the more applicable the following conditions are to a political movement, the stronger its populist character. First, the speaker divides society into two antagonistic camps of people and elites. Second, the speaker attributes moral superiority to the people and moral inferiority to the elites. Third, the speaker argues that the elites are blocking or restricting the rightful democratic powers of the people, and that these powers must be reclaimed by the people. Fourth, the speaker sides passionately with the people and against the elites.

### 3. Early populism in Japan

Populism research is relatively new in Japan, and this probably stems from the fact that Japan has largely been spared from the rowdy populism that has characterized European and American politics the past decade (for a summary of Japanese populism research, see Lindgren <sup>19)</sup> 2015). Most populism research in Japanese focuses on European populism, <sup>20)</sup> while analyses of Japanese populism are relatively rare. Today, the far most common Japanese term for populism is '*poppyurizumu*', but historically, the phenomenon has been referred to in various other ways. Kunisue Norito writes that, in addition to *poppyurizumu*, the following terms have been used in Japanese media articles: '*jinmin-shugi*' (people-ism), '*shimin-shugi*' (citizen-ism), '*taishū-*

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19 Lindgren, 'Developing Japanese populism research', pp. 574-592.

20 E.g. Mizushima, 'Hajime ni'; Shōji, *Ōshū poppyurizumu*; Kunisue, *Poppyurizumu-ka suru sekai*.

*shugi*' (mass-ism) and '*taishū geigō-shugi*' (mass pander-ism)<sup>21)</sup>. Populism is almost exclusively viewed negatively, and it is extremely rare to find positive evaluations of populist politics. Populism is frequently labeled a 'challenge'<sup>22)</sup> or a 'threat'<sup>23)</sup> to democracy. Yakushiin Hitoshi even argues that populism represents 'the destruction of parliamentary democracy'<sup>24)</sup>. These negative views are of course shared with many populism scholars outside Japan, but they may also stem from the historical experience of extreme violence when populism first appeared in Japan in the 1930s. In the following, we will turn to the empirical cases of populism in Japan.

### 3.1 The Showa Restoration: Emperor-centered populism in the 1930s

The earliest Japanese examples of what might be termed populism are found in the prewar period, when anti-elite sentiments often led to violent conflict. Such sentiments were particularly profound in the 1930s during which many Japanese experienced severe economic dislocations spurred by the Great Depression. Between 1929 and 1931, Japan suffered a 50 percent drop in exports and an 18 percent drop in GNP.<sup>25)</sup> Economic hardships bred revolutionary thinking and widespread distrust of economic and political elites. In his historical survey of Japanese right-wing politics, Yasuda Kōichi describes a series of right-wing terrorist attacks and coup attempts in the 1930s that were driven by resentment against wealthy bankers and corrupt politicians. In 1932, Inoue Junnosuke, a former Minister of Finance with a background in the banking

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21 Kunisue, *Popyurizumu-ka suru sekai*, p. 10.

22 Mizushima, Jirō (2020) *Popyurizumu to iu chōsen: Kiro ni tatsu gendai demokurashī* [The populist challenge: Modern democracy at a crossroads], Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten; Ikemoto, 'Popyurizumu no chōsen to EU'.

23 Kodate, Naonori (2018) 'Doitsu: Sengo no seiji taisei o yusaburu popyurizumu no kyōi' [Germany: The threat of populism shakes the postwar system], in Tanigaki Masaki and Jirō Mizushima (eds) *Popyurizumu no Honshitsu: 'Seiji-teki Sogai' o Kokufuku Dekiru ka* [The true nature of populism: Will [we] be able to overcome political alienation?], Tokyo: Chūō Kōron Shinsha, pp. 155-174.

24 Yakushiin, Hitoshi (2017) *Popyurizumu: Sekai o ōitsukusu 'mamono' no shōtai* [Populism: The 'evil spirit' that permeates the world], Tokyo: Shinchōsha, p. 231.

25 McClain, James L. (2002) *Japan: A Modern History*, New York and London, p. 405.

world, was assassinated by a 20-year-old member of a terrorist organization called the League of Blood [*Ketsumeidan*]. The League's goal was to 'overthrow the ruling class that is obsessed with self-interest, and realize a society where everyone is equal under the Emperor'<sup>26)</sup>. This goal was, in one form or another, common to all revolutionary right-wing projects in the 1930s, and it found a common expression in the idea of a 'Showa restoration' [*Shōwa ishin*], which would abolish Japan's young democracy and restore power in the hands of the Emperor. In order to achieve that goal, members of the League intended to assassinate prominent members of the established order. The League had a long list of targets, but they only succeeded in killing the aforementioned Inoue and the Director-General of the Mitsui conglomerate, Dan Takuma, before the organization was rounded up. Despite its violent tactics, the League of Blood enjoyed popular sympathy and its members received lenient sentences (the two assassins and the leader of the League were pardoned in 1940). Part of this popular sympathy probably stemmed from the fact that many at the time agreed with the League of Blood's analysis, according to which Japan was increasingly becoming an unfair and decadent society. However, as Yasuda points out, the most important reason was probably the League's loyalty to the Emperor, who enjoyed a god-like status in Japan at the time. If you were against the Emperor system, 'you would probably not be able to garner sympathy from the people in those days, no matter how much you flaunted moral principles, such as salvation from poverty'<sup>27)</sup>. Its violent tactics notwithstanding, the League's determination to protect the Emperor and create an equal society under his direct leadership, made many see the terrorist organization as something of a 'righteous criminal' [*gizoku*].

The 1930s also saw a number of failed or aborted military coups that were motivated by the same Showa Restoration populism that had fueled the League of Blood. In 1931, the Cherry Blossom Society [*Sakura-kai*], a secretive group of military officers,

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26 Yasuda, Kōichi (2018) *'Uyoku' no sengo-shi* [A postwar history of the 'right-wing'], Tokyo: Kōdansha, p. 17.

27 Kōichi, *'Uyoku' no sengo-shi*, p. 21.

planned two spectacular coups that ultimately never came to fruition due to internal leaks. The society's founding document was teeming with the peculiar Emperor-centered populism that was so prevalent at the time:

‘As we observe recent social trends, top leaders engage in immoral conduct, political parties are corrupt, capitalists and aristocrats have no understanding of the masses, farming villages are devastated, unemployment and depression are serious. [...] The people are with us in craving the appearance of a vigorous and clean government that is truly based upon the masses, and is genuinely centered around the Emperor’<sup>28)</sup>.

The Cherry Blossom Society's plans were eventually foiled and the society was broken up before it could act. However, in the following year, spectacular violence did occur, as a group of naval officers and ex-League of Blood members managed to kill Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi in his office, and proceeded to bomb police offices, the Bank of Japan, the Rikken Seiyūkai Party's headquarters and some electric power stations. Their goal was the same as the League of Blood and the Cherry Blossom Society: to bring about the creation of a just society under the leadership of the Emperor. Ultimately, the coup attempt failed and the instigators surrendered, but as before, the instigators received lenient sentences due to their allegedly ‘pure’ motives. This time too, the group's manifesto revealed that Emperor-centered populism was its driving force:

‘Political parties are blind in their pursuit of power and egoistic gains. Large enterprises are firmly in collusion with politicians as they suck the sweat and blood of the common people. Bureaucrats and police are busy defending the corrupt politico-industrial complex. Diplomacy is weak-kneed. Education is rotten to the core. Now is the time to carry out drastic, revolutionary change. Rise and take action now!’<sup>29)</sup>

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28 McClain, *Japan*, p. 414.

29 McClain, *Japan*, p. 416.

The crescendo of this kind of terror-populism took place in the so-called 2/26 incident of 1936, when a group of junior military officers, the so-called Imperial Way Faction, mobilized almost 1500 soldiers in a coup attempt. The rebels killed the Finance Minister, an ex-Prime Minister, and the inspector-general of Military education, while the sitting Prime Minister, Okada Keisuke, escaped only by a stroke of luck. Yasuda describes their motives in the following way:

‘The young officers known as the “Imperial Way Faction”, believed that, by crushing parliamentary politics in a coup d’état and implementing direct imperial rule, they would be able to correct the problems of poverty in the bondage-ridden rural areas, social inequalities such as the gap between rich and poor, and corruption in the corporate and political realms<sup>30)</sup>’.

The coup came to an end only when the Emperor personally denounced it and ordered the military to strike it down. This time, the instigators were not treated leniently, and 13 of them were sentenced to death. This was the last coup attempt in the chaotic 1930s.

The terror of the 1930 certainly has many similarities with populism as it has been characterized in this paper. The terrorists and coup-makers clearly acted out of a deep resentment for the established order, such as the ‘greedy conglomerate oligarchs’ and the ‘self-serving politicians’. They also frequently presented themselves as the defenders of the ordinary people whose plights had been worsened by the established order. This is in line with modern understandings of populism. However, there is good reason to question whether these incidents can be regarded as strong populism. The antagonism is certainly there, but, despite frequent invocations of ‘the people’, the revolutionaries of the 1930s did not envision a society in which the ‘general will’ of a sovereign people would form the basis of governance. On the contrary, the people were to be subjugated by the Emperor, who would hold absolute power. This is clearly

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30 Kōichi, *‘Uyoku’ no sengo-shi*, p. 22.

far removed from modern notions of populism, in which power is supposed to reside with the people. The Showa Restoration revolutionaries in prewar Japan, thus, seem to have more in common with fascism than populism. The distinction can at times be blurry,<sup>31)</sup> but, unlike the bottom-up power flow in populism, fascism is typically a top-down way of organizing society, with power emanating from the leader and trickling down through the various levels of the state. That being said, there is an undeniable populist element in the right-wing discourse of the 1930s. Paul Taggart has pointed out that populists tend to invoke the notion of an imaginary ‘heartland’. This refers to an idealized version of the past in which ‘the people’ coexist harmoniously in a society with shared values. Populists typically claim that this pure heartland has ‘been lost by the present’<sup>32)</sup> and must be reclaimed. The Showa Restoration discourse clearly exhibited nostalgia for a mythical past in which a pure Japanese people lived in harmony under the benevolent rule of the Emperor. The fact that such a Japanese heartland had never existed is irrelevant because its primary function was to offer the revolutionaries a contradistinction to the corrupt order of the present. As is typical of the heartland, this contradistinction is not found in a yet-unwritten future, but in an allegedly glorious past. Insofar the heartland is a populist element, the Showa Restoration discourse did exhibit a populist flair, but its Emperor worship has more in common with fascism than populism. Tsutsui Kiyotada (2018) has argued that ‘prewar populism’ played a major role in plunging Japan into World War Two,<sup>33)</sup> but it seems more apt to say that fascism with populist elements did so.

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31 Eatwell, Roger (2017) ‘Populism and fascism’, in Rovira Kaltwasser, Cristóbal, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 363-383.

32 Taggart, *Populism*, p. 95.

33 Tsutsui, Kiyotada (2018) *Senzen Nihon no popyurizumu* [Populism in prewar Japan], Tokyo: Chūō Kōron Shinsha.

#### 4. The long populist absence under the 55 system

After the end of World War Two, populism virtually disappeared in Japan. During most of the Cold War, Japanese politics was characterized by the dominance of the conservative elites in the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The LDP remained in power from its founding in 1955 to 1993, a period that is known as the '55 system' [55 nen taisei] in Japan. During this period, the LDP's biggest challenger was the Japan Socialist Party (JSP), but the JSP challenge rarely prevented the LDP from capturing majorities in both the Upper and the more important Lower House. The 55 system was unquestionably a period of elite hegemony, and thus the opposite of populism.<sup>34)</sup> One expression of this elite rule can be seen in the way the LDP was constituted. Daniel M. Smith shows that Japanese postwar politics has been dominated by politicians who come from political dynasties, defined as families in which other members have also served as politicians. Smith labels such politicians 'legacy MPs'. Such politicians have been especially prevalent in the LDP. While legacy MPs constituted a little more than 10 percent of LDP politicians in 1955, the number grew to a peak of almost 50 percent by the end of the 55 system.<sup>35)</sup> Japanese postwar politics, and especially the LDP, have thus been the domains of elite families.

One could perhaps suspect that this kind of long, uninterrupted rule by an elite class would spur a populist backlash teeming with resentment towards the monopolization of power by a relatively small number of political families. The reason why that did not happen during the Cold War period can be found in the particular structures of postwar Japanese society and, perhaps more important, the policies of the LDP as a ruling party.

Despite being a party *of* elites, the LDP was not exclusively a party *for* elites. The beneficiaries of the LDP's policies were not mainly the urban capitalist elites, but rather the farmers in the rural areas who constituted the LDP's largest voting base. By the

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34 Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism*, p. 7.

35 Smith, Daniel M. (2018) *Dynasties and Democracy: The Inherited Incumbency Advantage in Japan*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 127-128.

end of the 55 system, nearly two thirds of the LDP seats were drawn from these rural areas, so it was highly important to keep the agricultural sector satisfied.<sup>36)</sup> Successive LDP governments during the Cold War went to great lengths to protect Japanese agriculture, granting farmers state subsidies and slapping tariffs on foreign agricultural products. The tariff on foreign polished rice, for example, reached a whopping 777 percent.<sup>37)</sup> Even when governments did try to liberalize the agricultural sector, they were often prevented by ‘protectionist politicians in the ruling LDP who [...] acted directly to block their own government’s trade policy initiatives from within the policymaking process’.<sup>38)</sup> This powerful group of politicians, known as the ‘agriculture and forestry tribe’ [*nōrin-zoku*], maintained extremely tight, clientelist relations with the farmers in the districts, and they would use their power to sabotage any attempt at liberalization.

Rural communities have also benefitted from an election system that favors rural districts over urban districts to such an extent that the Supreme Court repeatedly has ruled elections to be in ‘a state of unconstitutionality’.<sup>39)</sup> The number of seats allocated to a voting district is supposed to reflect its population, but as people began moving away from the countryside and into the cities in the postwar period, the LDP fought hard to prevent seat allocation from being adjusted to the trend of urbanization, thus favoring rural voters whose votes became more valuable than those of urban voters. The discrepancy between the value of the vote in the most overrepresented and underrepresented districts at times reached five-to-one in the Lower House and six-to-one in the Upper House.<sup>40)</sup> Since overrepresentation was a rural phenomenon and

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36 Neary, Ian (2019) *The State and Politics in Japan, Second Edition*, Cambridge and Medford, MA: Polity Press, p. 154.

37 Lind, ‘Nationalist in a liberal order’, p. 66.

38 George Mulgan, Aurelia (2019) ‘The politics of trade policy’, in Kingston, Jeff (ed.) *Critical Issues in Contemporary Japan, Second Edition*, Oxon and New York: Routledge, p. 17.

39 *The Japan Times* (2015) ‘Editorial. Time to fix the vote-value disparity’, November 27, Retrieved from <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2015/11/27/editorials/time-fix-vote-value-disparity/#.X0Tj1zWRVPa>.

40 Hayes, Lois D. (2009) *Introduction to Japanese Politics, Fifth Edition*, New York and London: M. E. Sharpe, p. 121.

underrepresentation an urban one, this situation greatly benefitted the LDP whose voter base was rural, and hurt the JSP and other parties whose voter bases were mainly urban. But it also benefitted the rural communities, as it gave them a disproportionately large influence over Japanese politics.

Thus, although the LDP was a party made up of elites from political family dynasties, it developed a close relation with the unglamorous (and often unproductive) farming communities in the Japanese countryside and implemented policies that benefitted the latter. These policies prevented the emergence of a disgruntled rural population that felt left behind in the process of modernization and urbanization. While rural populations in many European countries have been neglected and, in frustration, have turned to populists for recognition and help,<sup>41)</sup> Japanese farming communities have seen the elites in the LDP as their greatest benefactors and a source of empowerment. As Yoichi Funabashi points out, '[t]he main demographic of disenchanting voters who supported Brexit in Britain and the election of Donald Trump in the United States are relatively uneducated people, middle-age or older, who live in rural areas. In Japan, that is the group that commands the most political power'.<sup>42)</sup>

Although rural communities benefitted the most, they were not the only beneficiaries of LDP policies. In the crucial decades after World War Two, when the decimated Japanese industrial sector was trying to reestablish itself, LDP-led governments implemented a number of protectionist policies to shield Japanese manufacturers from foreign competition. By prioritizing domestic trade and investment laws over free trade agreement obligations, Japan skillfully managed to limit imports and foreign direct investment that could have threatened domestic industries.<sup>43)</sup> Without such protectionist policies in the early and most vulnerable stages of reconstruction, it is doubtful that

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41 Mamonova, Natalia and Jaume Franquesa (2020) 'Populism, neoliberalism and agrarian movements in Europe. Understanding rural support for right-wing politics and looking for progressive solutions', *Sociologia Ruralis* 60(4), pp. 710-731.

42 Funabashi, Yoichi (2017) 'Japan, where populism fails', *New York Times*, February 8, retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/08/opinion/japan-where-populism-fails.html>.

43 Lind, 'Nationalist in a liberal order', p. 65.

Japanese shipbuilders, steel manufacturers, and car producers would have succeeded and that the postwar economic miracle would have been possible. An alternative developmental path of foreign dominance on Japanese markets and slow growth could have provided a fertile breeding ground for populist sentiments, as was the case in the 1930s. Indeed, Jennifer Lind attributes Japan's absence of populism to its 'illiberal' trade policies in the agricultural and industrial sectors.<sup>44)</sup>

Japan's economic growth in the postwar period naturally led to increased tax revenue for the government. Although the LDP governments prioritized the rural areas, they also used this revenue in ways that benefitted the whole population. The most famous example of this kind of redistributive policy was Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato's 1960 income doubling plan, whereby he promised to double the national income level in just ten years. The gist of the plan was to 1) improve public sector services, such as infrastructure, social security and welfare; 2) provide better education and job training; 3) take seriously the problem of inequality; and 4) develop the districts.<sup>45)</sup> Such redistributive policies created an impression among most of the Japanese public that the elites in government were working for them, and they took the improvements in their own living standards as evidence that this perception was true. Despite a number of nasty corruption scandals on the political level, there never emerged a strong demand for anti-elite populism.

In addition to the policies of the LDP, Mizushima Jirō points out two important societal factors that also contributed to the lack of populism under the 55 system. First, most Japanese were members of organizations and interest groups that had close ties to the establishment parties. The LDP generally enjoyed support from agrarian organizations, medium and small business organizations, and religious organizations, while the JSP was supported by labor unions, welfare organizations, cooperatives, regional organizations and women's organizations.<sup>46)</sup> In 1989 only 17 percent of the adult

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44 Lind, 'Nationalist in a liberal order', p. 52-74.

45 Yoshioka, Shinji and Hirofumi Kawasaki (2016) *Japan's High-Growth Postwar Period: The Role of Economic Plans*, ESRI Research Note No. 27, retrieved from [http://www.esri.go.jp/jp/archive/e\\_note/e\\_note030/e\\_note027.pdf](http://www.esri.go.jp/jp/archive/e_note/e_note030/e_note027.pdf), p. 16.

population did not participate in any organization, meaning that most Japanese were organized in one way or another. Although these organizations did not necessarily have formal ties to the establishment parties, they often mobilized their members to vote for candidates from the parties they had close relations with. In this way, the high membership rate in these organizations strengthened the establishment parties, and made it very difficult for would-be populist outsiders to garner support.

Secondly, the large consumption of mainstream media, which generally only covered the establishment parties, made it difficult for outsiders to spread their message. It also ensured that voters got relatively similar information about society, the economy, and politics, even if there were differences between the left-leaning and right-leaning news outlets. Japanese newspapers had the largest readership in the world, and their focus on the political competition between the LDP and the JSP allowed these establishment parties to dominate the political conversation.<sup>47)</sup> Similar to the above-mentioned organizations, Japan's establishment-oriented mainstream media made it almost impossible for populist messages to spread and resonate. Political competition was strictly confined to the traditional left-right axis (JSP vs. LDP) rather than to the populist up-down axis (elites vs. people).

Due to the LDP's protectionist and redistributive policies as a ruling party and to societal factors, such as organizational membership and mass media consumption, it was possible for an elite party such as the LDP to enjoy broad support. Thus, under the 55 system there was no sign of populism on the horizons of Japan's political landscape.

(To be continued in the next issue)

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46 Mizushima, Jirō (2020) 'Chūkan dantai no suitai to media no henyō' [The decline of intermediary organizations and the transformation of the media], in Mizushima, Jirō (ed.) *Popyurizumu to iu chōsen: Kiro ni tatsu gendai demokurashī* [The populist challenge: Modern democracy at a crossroads], Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, p. 29.

47 Mizushima, 'Chūkan dantai no suitai', p. 29.