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Populism, the popular and democracy

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At a press conference during the presidential election campaign in 2016 former president Obama declared it was he and not Donald Trump who was a populist. Obama stated he was the one who fought for the little ones in society, for worker's rights ect.² Such a self declaration of being populist stand in marked contrast to Europe generally, but especially the Northern parts, where 'populism' is almost unequivocally a pejorative term. In Danish (as in the other Scandinavian languages) the word for popular is 'folkelig', with the root from the German 'Volk', and popular generally has the connotation of 'pop' (as in pop-music and pop-art). The Scandinavian languages therefore allow for a relatively clear distinction between 'folkelig' (the popular) – and populism. In contrast to generally the case with populism, 'folkelig' is almost unequivocally a positive term. Almost everybody wants to be 'folkelig', no one wants to be populist.

However, as it has been pointed out the difference between the two terms only stem from their linguistic roots, ancient German vs Latin. Literally, in Danish populism means 'folkelig', even

¹ Forthcoming in Spanish as 'Populismo, lo popular y la democracia' to be published in *Populismo y hegemonía: retos para la política emancipatoria, I. Presupuestos teóricos*, Lengua de Trapo 2019; ed Pepe Ema Lopez and Emma Ingala Gómez
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² Obama: *Trump is no populist*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSOWEC1qZRE>

‘friend of the people’ in Danish (Hansen 2017). This points to something of a paradox, highlighted by the fact, that the book in which this clarification is stated is called *How Populism Distorts Democracy* (ibid). Obviously, is one was to exchange ‘populism’ with ‘folkelig’ in the title, and recall that democracy – popular rule – literally is translated to ‘folke-styre’ in Danish, the paradox stands out in all clarity: “How ‘folkelighed’ distorts ‘folkestyre’”.

To a Spanish speaking audience, it is also worth noticing the book goes through a set of populist movements, including Podemos – together with a set of right-wing populisms (Front national, Danish Peoples Party etc.) – without even trying to show how Podemos lives up to the set of truly doubtful characteristics the author states as indicative of populism in general. M. H. Hansen is perfectly aware of the societal problems populism grows from: "Inequality grows, the EU gains more and more power, and the power elite at the top of society seems tightly knit," as he put it in an interview. Interestingly, M H Hansen's cure is to "make democracy more popular" (‘folkeligt’ in Danish), only highlighting the paradox even more.

Contrary to what is widely held to be the case, in this essay I argue populism as such does not ‘distort’ democracy. Quite the contrary, populism has strong parallels to democracy, in at least three aspects, namely in underlining the sovereignty of the people as the only principle of legitimacy; in being an attempt at mobilizing, i.e. strengthening the participation of ‘the people’ and finally, in underling the anti-elitist drive in democracy.

It is not difficult to understand why populism in general is seen as a problem. The reason is that most of the debate on populism is based on (criticism of) right-wing populism. It is names like Trump, Orban, Le Pen which shapes the image of the ‘populists’. The problem is most people without acknowledging it disperses characteristics from right-wing populism to apply to populism as such, to *any* party or movement we might call ‘populist’. However, populism is an incredibly multifaceted phenomenon, and it has some very unfortunate consequences when equating features that belong to (contemporary) right-populism and populism in general.

Firstly, because we end up rejecting movements and parties that actually deserve interest and support. To example, many branches of Latin American populism, generally acknowledged for its ‘inclusiveness’, have succeeded in including large parts of the original population previously excluded. If such parties and movements are rejected *in toto*, simply from referring to their ‘populism’, we easily end up rejecting any criticism of status quo. Especially in relation to the EU, this is a serious problem. Many voices in the debate on populism such as Jan Werner Müller (2016), comes dangerously close in concluding that any criticism of the EU equals ‘a populist fear of foreigners’. M. H. Hansen is otherwise very explicit in his analysis that the EU is actually part of

many of the problems our democracies face, tends to argue in this direction. Without this (implicit) argument, it is very difficult to see why Podemos is grouped with all the right-wing populists he reviews in the book.

Is it not just a matter of words? Why don't we just reserve the word populism for right-wing populism, and use 'popular' ('folkelig') for the movements with whom we sympathize? Let's look into a revealing recent use of the notion of *populism* in a Danish context. Commenting on the disproportionality between the minor British demonstrations (app 6000) doing civil disobedience for climate initiatives and the major French 'yellow vests' protests (app 288.000) against the raise in prices on fossil fuels, a Comment in a Danish daily (generally considered very serious and somewhat to the left) *Information* stated: "Removing state aid for fossil fuels seems to be one of the more obvious steps to meet the demand of the British demonstrators. However, as the French demonstrations show, there is an obvious explanation of political sluggishness. This it does not take a populist to see." (Rottbøll 2018)

Presumably, the common sense notion of populism is rather precisely articulated in the quote. None of the 55 comments addresses that aspect of the argument. In the Comment populism means pandering to the 'popular will', or rather as we say in Danish, popular 'moods'. The proper attitude of responsible politicians is the opposite, to stand up for their views.

In a liberal perspective it is not surprising democracy can be articulated with a certain distrust of the popular will, and in favour of elitism. From a left wing position, anti-elitism ought to be fundamental. However, it leads to certain difficulties. As a thought experiment try to swap the two numbers in the above quote, so that protest against the rise in fuel prices had only attracted 6000 participants. Most of us would probably have welcomed a scene of 288.000 protesters in favour of climate action. But would it have triggered associations to populism? I doubt it. The difference between political action vs. 'sluggishness' is not the difference between populist and non-populist politics, since lots of populist initiatives are of quite an activist form. The invocation of 'populism' is rather based on 'following the popular mood', and, significantly, when it is the *wrong* thing to do.

We can trace this attitude back to Marxism. To Marxism the interests of the proletariat was the interests of humanity as such. Therefore, 'the popular will' was either conterminous with the interests of the proletariat, and as such (theoretically) redundant. Or, which was clearly expressed in Marxists theories of populism, it was the wrong thing. Either because populism was based in the petty bourgeoisie (with which only temporary alliances could be build), or, to the extent 'populist ideas' gained hold in the working class, it was an expression of false consciousness.

A less crude example of this logic we find in the otherwise much more sensitive and complex analysis of ideologies and hegemony in the British author Stuart Hall. Confronted with Thatcher's electoral victories Hall developed some very strong analysis, far from the traditional idea of 'false consciousness' (Hall 1988a, 1988b). He introduced the term 'authoritarian populism' to grasp the specificity of Thatcher's project. Commenting on the choice of that term he later stated:

"... I distanced my more delimited use of the term 'populism' from [Ernesto Laclau's] more inclusive one, attempting thereby to distinguish the genuine mobilization of popular demands and discontents from a 'populist' mobilization which, at a certain point in its trajectory, flips over or is recuperated into a statist-led political leadership." (Hall 1985)

The question, which he unfortunately does not answer, is how to actually know what 'the genuine popular demands' are? Related to our example above, is the French protests against rising prices on fossil fuels genuine popular or populist?

We should therefore maintain the notion of populism and 'reclaim' its meaning of popularity ('folkelighed') – even though this involves acknowledging that the popular can be articulated in ways which are not in accordance with left wing principles of equality and inclusion. But we should retain the notion of populism because there are elements of populism which *per se* constitute a possibility of strengthening of democracy, no matter if it is left- or right-wing populism we are dealing with. I will mention three.

First, populism is an invocation of the people as the decisive source of legitimacy. As I have argued, populism means 'popularity', and the left (in the broadest sense of the word) should welcome the fact that political forces are trying to bring the (figure of the) people and its interests back into centre stage of politics.

Second, populism is an attempt to mobilize. There are, *inter alia*, something activist about populism, an attempt to strengthen 'the people's commitment and participation in democracy. Obviously, for many of the present populist leaders and parties the level of actual involvement of the people is quite limited, but the logic of populism involves an attempt at mobilization.

Third, populism makes explicit the people is in opposition to an elite, 'the power block', 'the caste' or whatever they are called. At least for a left-wing perspective, it should be obvious that there is something anti-elitist in democracy. Democracy is the people's assertion of their rights. Originally

in antagonism to monarchy and aristocracy, nowadays to the 'elite'. Of course, to define who 'the elite is', is a political question. The left should advocate another definition of 'the elite' than right-wing populism's. In the US the owners of the big companies were not a part of the elite in Trump's project, only the 'swamp' in Washington. Sometimes right and left-wing populism might point to some of the same, e.g. the EU, but the left should (hopefully) point to other problematic parts of the EU than Orban and PIS in Poland do.

Do these three dimensions really apply to all populisms? Isn't right-wing populism just demagogy, seduction of the people and not the expression of a sincere desire to strengthen the people in democracy?

Firstly, one should always be careful to argue that political leaders do not mean what they say, i.e. they blatantly try to 'seduce' the people for their own sake. My own assessment is Marie le Pen actually believes what she is saying, Farage actually wants UK out of the EU, and even Trump (probably) believes Washington is a swamp to be drained. Anyway, to answer the question of their in/sincerity would require us to gain access to their actual inner thoughts. At least for that reason, the interesting question is not the extent to which they mean what they say. It is rather how and why they gain get support for saying it – and not least the articulation of the left alternative.

Secondly, even though the mobilization of right-wing populism also involves an element of mobilisation, it is usually limited to (hope for) support for the leader and the project rather than actual active participation. Left wing populism should of course strive to maintain an activist element of mobilisation. It can take many forms, from a broad popular engagement and activism, to relate to protest movements and attempts to link more solid relations to political and social movements. Something e.g. Podemos have not only tried to establish but actually grew from.

Thirdly, right-wing populism also tries to mobilize in opposition to the elite. Of course, you can take a liberal right-wing viewpoint and argue that elite criticism is problematic in itself. This was to example highly present in a Danish daily, *Politiken* (traditionally a somewhat leftist 'culturally radical newspaper') which during the summer of 2017 brought a full series of articles on 'The Damned Elite',³ with the implicit agenda that elite criticism is right wing demagoguery. However, in a time of growing inequality, global tax evasion, technocratisation and pronounced consensus on

3 https://politiken.dk/tag/main/Den_forbandede_elite

'the necessary politics', elite criticism in itself should not be the targeted by the left. The left ought to enter the struggle to *define the elite*, or rather of defining which parts of the elites are problematic for democracy. Trump has precisely succeeded in mobilizing on a criticism of the 'political elite' and has articulated the interests of big business interests as coterminous with those of the people: it's big business which can create jobs and help (the lower) middle class out of its problems. How should the left respond to this challenge? By rejecting 'elite criticism' as such, or through a political effort to make the extremely wealthy a part of the elite whom the people must be mobilized to curtail.

Is there no reason for concern about right-wing populism? Yes, there certainly is. Currently, the vast majority of right-wing populisms are explicitly anti-immigration. In other words the opposition to the people is not only an elite, but also some 'strangers' which this elite has either directly given access, or at least has not done enough to keep out. The left should of course construct their opponent solely as the elite, and not as including refugees and immigrants.

However, the relationship to 'strangers' also has its complexities. Firstly, right-wing populism probably doesn't have to be xenophobic. Populism can be given the most diverse expressions and one can easily imagine a right-wing mobilization a la Trump against a political elite without the pointing out of 'strangers' as a threat to 'the people'. Secondly, the critique of xenophobia does not mean the left-wing project should just be in favour of 'open borders'. Importing cheap labour is actually a 'popular' problem (c.f. Sanders' campaign in the United States).⁴ Left wing representatives are not always sufficiently clear in articulating a critique of a present problematic 'open borders' policy *together* with long-term strategies to offset economic inequality between countries and regions. However, it is still perfectly legitimate to fight to maintain achieved popular rights.

Are there no problems with populism at all? Generally, the 'populist hype' is most of all an expression of the fact that we in North-Western Europe (including major parts of the left) have forgotten the popular element of democracy. We seem to have forgotten that democracy is not primarily about compliance with procedures, safeguarding individual rights, etc. but rather the people's right to self-determination. First of all in opposition to the non-popular, as I mentioned, originally the monarch and the aristocracy, presently the elites.

However, there are potential problems. Populism is based on the dimension of democracy emphasising popular self-determination. As I have argued in itself this is highly democratic.

4 <https://berniesanders.com/open-borders-a-gimmick-not-a-solution/>

However, it is not without its potential problems. The self-determination of the people, or 'popular sovereignty', necessarily involve an invocation of *A* people, in the singular. However, democracy also involves the acceptance of the rights of others to gain power. As Lefort has famously put it, in a democracy one can *have* power, one cannot *be* the power (Lefort 1988). Populism may become undemocratic if a movement or party claims to present 'THE will of the people' without accepting other political forces' right to fight to gain power. It is a real danger, but it originates in democracy itself, in the very idea of the people's self-determination, and not specifically linked to populism. Populism also holds this danger because populism is a democratic logic emphasising its popular aspects.

The second potential problem is populism's relationship to pluralism. Populism emphasises the people's self-determination, but most of us would probably prefer this dimension to be combined with an acceptance of pluralism, an acceptance of the right to live different lives. This is the liberal dimension of modern democracy, and any claim to represent the interests of the people must necessarily downplay the pluralistic side of democracy. It is certainly not unproblematic, but there are two things to keep in mind. First, pluralism can never be total. Even the most pluralist democratic regime must draw boundaries between what it can accept and what it cannot: terrorism, anti-democratic movements, etc. Therefore, the real difference is not one between pluralists and anti-pluralists, but in disagreements as to *where* the boundaries of pluralism are to be drawn. In relation to this aspect there are quite a lot of deeply worrying features in right-populist movements – as well as in certain left wing populisms, e.g. in Venezuela. However, this concern should not lead the left away from being basically anti-elitist. The criticism of the elite by leftist movements such as Podemos' fight against the 'caste' in Spain or Syriza's criticism of the elite in the EU should be supported, not condemned as many critics of populism tend to do. If this kind of democratic struggle is confused with anti-pluralism, any genuine left-wing mobilisation is made impossible.

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