Populism and who it’s for

What does it take for people to get mobilized for the common good?

by Luke Bretherton in the June 19, 2019 issue

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Populism is a perennial feature of forms of rule that include democratic elements. Critics of populism see it as an aberration that unless prevented or punctured will poison a liberal democratic body politic. Against such a view, I contend that populism is an inherent, and often benign, feature of democratic politics. Yet, as with all forms of politics, it can become toxic.

Part of the difficulty in understanding populism is its protean nature. Populism is a sponge that soaks up the ideological spills and stains that surround it. This feature sits alongside others, including opposing instinct and emotion against a rational legal spirit; a simplified antagonistic vision of society, in which a detached ruling class betrays the common people; and the possibility of restoring the equilibrium between the ruled majority and the ruling minority by empowering the former.

These can serve both utopian and conservative ideological goals of either the left or the right.

Part of the democratic impulse of populism is to render politics more understandable for everyday citizens. As Benjamin Moffitt points out in *The Global Rise of Populism*, "the populist embrace of the political 'low,' 'bad manners' and tendency towards simplification can provide an appealing and comprehensible contrast to the increasingly rarefied and technocratic styles of politics that characterize the contemporary political landscape."

Moffitt identifies two other democratic features of populism: it can include previously excluded identities within the performances of "the people," and it can reveal the dysfunctions of contemporary democratic systems by pointing to corruption or elite indifference. Examples range from calling attention to the lack of choice provided by a two-party system (as Ross Perot has done in the United States and Pauline Hanson in Australia) to naming the democratic deficits of the European Union (as the UK Independence Party has done).

There have been various attempts to develop a comprehensive theory of populism. Much of this work takes a wholly negative view, seeing populism as deviant, peripheral, and a sign of democratic decay. This negative view is prevalent in Europe and North America, where journalistic and academic work on populism is focused on the emergence of right-wing, anti-immigrant parties and movements.

But the scope of such work is parochial and historically myopic. It disregards the populist nature of the "third wave" of democratic revolutions that ended communism in Poland, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia and overthrew the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines. It also ignores phenomena such as the international peasants' movement, La Via Campesina. And it overlooks the ambiguities of a figure like Pim Fortuyn, the openly gay populist mayor of Rotterdam in the Netherlands, who adopted anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic stances in the name of defending tolerance and liberal democracy.

Within many critical readings, *populism* becomes a term of abuse that labels the common folk as uneducated, vulgar, and simplistic in contrast to cultivated, educated elites. In such a view, the former should not be allowed to rule, whereas the latter are the rightful rulers. The empirical basis of populist parties and movements rarely backs up such designations: elites can be populists too. But there

is a latent antidemocratic suspicion among critics of populism about whether ordinary people can be allowed to govern. If they do govern, critics wonder, will they coarsen political life and generate chaotic or ruinous policies? This reflects an ancient concern that reaches back to the elites of Greece and Rome.

There is also a converse suspicion that elites are incapable of serving goods in common and instead serve only elite interests. In this view, elites pursue policies (for example, trickle-down economics) that are proclaimed as benefiting everyone when they mostly benefit the privileged and powerful.

This mutual antagonistic suspicion is an inevitable feature of democracies, and it's not unjustified. What is popular can be idiotic and simplistic, and what is done by elites can be self-serving, corrupt, and oppressive even while it proclaims itself enlightened, progressive, and for the good of all. Democratic politics is that process through which these antagonisms are addressed peaceably rather than violently.

The ideological indeterminacy of populism makes categorizing it along a left-right spectrum a conceptual mistake.

Democracy itself can turn into the tyranny of the majority and, as Tocqueville observed, produce a distinctly democratic form of servility that substitutes politics for a combination of philanthropy and paternalism. According to the political theorists Margaret Canovan and Ernesto Laclau, populism should not be seen as something inherently dangerous and thus a phenomenon to be rejected but rather as playing out tensions within democracy itself.

For Canovan, populism is a contextual phenomenon that reacts to whatever is hegemonic. And in the context of modern liberal democracies, populism is an inherent possibility born out of the oscillation between what she identifies as the "redemptive" and the "pragmatic" faces of democracy (see her 1999 article "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy" in *Political Studies*). When democracy, which offers government of the people, by the people, and for the people (its redemptive face), is reduced to a mechanism for negotiating and resolving conflicts of interest and distributing power (its pragmatic face), Canovan explains, populists "move on to the vacant territory, promising in place of the dirty world of party maneuvering the shining ideal of democracy renewed." Or in the words of Donald Trump, it offers to "drain the swamp."

Building on Canovan's thought, a constructive way to distinguish between different kinds of populism is to distinguish between a populist democratic politics and antipolitical forms of populism.

A *populist democratic politics* attempts to construct a common life not by denying friend-enemy distinctions but rather by generating (through a heightened process of conflict and conciliation) a richer sense of what is the good of the whole body politic.

An *antipolitical populism* refuses the possibilities of a common life, narrowing what is considered common through exclusionary and dichotomized visions of who is and who is not part of the people.

A populist democratic politics embodies a conception of politics that works to reinstate plurality and inhibit totalizing monopolies (whether of the state or market) through common action and deliberation, both of which depend on personal participation in and responsibility for tending a common life.

By contrast, antipolitical populism seeks to simplify the political space rather than render it more complex. It advocates direct forms of democracy in order to circumvent the need for deliberative processes and the representation of multiple interests in the formation of political judgments. The leader rules by direct consent without the hindrance of checks and balances or the representation of different interests.

In antipolitical populism, throwing out established authority structures is the prelude to giving over authority to the one and giving up responsibility for the commons. The goal of antipolitical populism is personal withdrawal from public life so as to be free to pursue private self-interests rather than public mutual interests.

Antipolitical and democratic forms of populism share several traits. They both:

- emphasize the need for leadership;
- dichotomize and simplify issues;
- advocate for direct forms of rule;
- romanticize the wisdom of ordinary people;
- distrust universalist ideologies and the prioritizing of international issues;
- suspect theory, envisaging themselves as pragmatic;
- distrust party politics, elites, and bureaucracy;
- use affective rituals and symbols to generate a sense of unity; and

- mobilize dissent through the organizing theme of ordinary people versus elites, which functions as both the subject of grievance and the means of correction.

But there are critical differences between a populist democratic politics and antipolitical populism. A populist democratic politics:

- puts populist orientations and sentiments in the service of forging a shared political space—not limiting it, subverting it, or closing it down;
- invests in long-term organization and education (e.g.,the role of the “lecturer” in the Populist Movement and the “organizer” in community organizing);
- develops a broad base of local leaders rather than relying on one charismatic leader and short-term mobilization of people who are focused not on loyalty to each other and a common life but on loyalty to the single leader and the cause or issue;
- frames proposals as moral imperatives but at the same time sees compromise as “a key and beautiful word” (as Saul Alinsky once put it); and
- reconstitutes the sense of what it means to be a people in a way that incorporates rather than demonizes those who are considered other.

In short, populist democratic politics seeks to generate a common life as against a politics dominated by the interests of the one, the few, or the many. Populism corrupts when it wholly identifies the people with the interests of a part rather than the common. And as a general rule, while populist *movements* can be democratic or contain strong democratic elements, populism as a *regime of statecraft* is rarely, if ever, democratic, as it quickly degenerates into a form of authoritarianism.

Historical examples are the best way to understand populism, and the Populist Movement in the United States in the late 19th century is a useful paradigm. The Populists originated in a broad-based and fractious movement that emerged in the United States from the 1850s onward. Populism reached its high point in the 1890s with the formation of the People’s Party, which challenged the duopoly of the Republicans and Democrats but declined rapidly as a formal movement thereafter. Yet, like an event of nuclear fission, its half-life continues to be felt long after its moment of greatest energy.

The vital centers of the Populist Movement were the Midwest, Southwest, and Southeast, with concentrations of activity in Texas, Kansas, and Oklahoma. While primarily an agrarian phenomenon, its political impact came through forging a

farmer-labor alliance. Populism is a taproot for some contemporary forms of radical democratic politics in the United States, most notably, community organizing.

A corrupt form of populism demonizes those considered outside “the people.”

The contemporary consensus among scholars of Populism seems to be that it was a broadly republican critique of the overconcentration of “money power.” This critique was combined with the language of evangelical Protestantism, Methodist camp meetings, and Baptist revivals to generate a powerful rhetoric that challenged the status quo. It thereby represents a convergence of ecclesial and democratic populism that reiterated earlier moments of similar convergences, most notably in the Second Great Awakening.

Populist language cut across the color line, shared as it was by black and white Populists. At the same time, however, it alienated the predominantly Catholic industrial workers in the Northeast. That the discursive framework of the Populists worked with the values and traditions of its participants contrasts starkly with Marxist-inspired movements, which viewed the sundering of people’s traditional communal and place-based ties as the prerequisite of freedom.

In *The Populist Persuasion*, Michael Kazin identifies four themes that shaped Populist discourse in the 1890s and which the ongoing tradition of American populism has deployed in multiple ways. The first is “Americanism,” identified as an emphasis on understanding and obeying the will of the people. Second is “producerism,” which is the conviction that, in contrast to classical and aristocratic conceptions, those who toiled were morally superior to those who lived off the toil of others. Producerism maintains the belief that only those who create wealth in tangible material ways can be trusted to guard the nation’s liberties.

Counterpoised to producerism is a third theme: the need to oppose the dominance of privileged elites (variously identified as government bureaucrats, cosmopolitan intellectuals, high financiers, industrialists, or a combination of all four). These elites are seen as subverting the principles of self-rule and personal liberty through centralizing power and imposing abstract plans on the ways people live. The final theme is the notion of a movement or crusade that is engaged in a battle to save the nation and protect the welfare of “real” America or the common people.

While these themes are identifiable points of focus in the Populist Movement, like all forms of populism, the movement was ideologically porous. For example, the

Populists saw a need for government intervention: to establish the conditions for fair access to public goods such as transport, credit, and a postal service, modern centralized government bureaucracies needed to exist.

Elizabeth Sanders, in *Roots of Reform*, summarizes the movement's approach:

> Its philosophy was anticorporate, though not *anticapitalist*. It sought, as recent scholars have established, not to turn the clock back on industrial development but to harness the new technological power for social good, to use the state to check exploitative excesses, to uphold the rights and opportunities of labor (farm and factory), and to maintain a healthy and creative business competition. The program was profoundly opposed to concentrated corporate power. Where concentration seemed inevitable, and for vital economic functions on which the well-being of the entire society depended, it was best that complete government control be established.

At the same time, Populists developed the rudiments of a "cooperative commonwealth" consisting of a huge range of autonomous institutions, educational initiatives, and mutual associations such as cooperatives in order to address their needs without being dependent on the banks or the state. Rather than fixate on local concerns, they sought to organize translocally and generate institutional forms at the appropriate scale in order to secure their aims. Inevitably, in such a diverse movement, a wide variety of people were involved, ranging from doctrinaire socialists (of various sorts) to white nationalists.

By the 1890s the Populists sought reform in three major areas: land, transportation, and money. These came to expression in what is known as the "Omaha Platform." Populists called for limits to land speculation and advocated for the nationalization of railroads, telephones, and telegraphs (as these were natural monopolies that needed to operate in the interests of everyone). Further, they called for the formation of a central bank directly responsible to elected officials and a flexible currency (created by both the issuing of paper money known as greenbacks and the free coinage of silver).

In addition, the platform endorsed the enforcement of the eight-hour working day, referendums to introduce elements of direct democracy into the system of representative democracy, and a graduated income tax. After the failure of local and

regional efforts to break the crop-lien system that resulted in the debt slavery of both black and white farmers, the Populists came to endorse the “subtreasury plan,” a federally backed farm commodity price support program.

What these measures add up to is an attempt to reembed labor, land, and money within a social and political matrix and thereby to inhibit the destructive effects of commodification on place-based political and social relations. In terms of the Populists’ own frames of reference, “money power” in the form of laissez-faire capitalism fell under a theological judgment: it was seen to be destroying the people as a moral community, and it threatened the nation with God’s judgment. The government, as the embodiment of the will of the people, needed to act to make things right and thereby fulfill its covenantal role.

At this point I must sound a note of caution. Historical forms of populism can be democratic or authoritarian and often combine elements of both. For example, rather than being straightforwardly fascist, Peronism in Argentina and Huey Long in Louisiana both exemplify the integration of democratic and authoritarian elements. Populism (as opposed to fascism) is thus an ambiguous political phenomenon. Moreover, unlike fascists, populists insist on the values of equality (among the people) rather than hierarchy, and they prioritize the community and right relations within it, rather than the state and stable order.

Kazin tells a declension narrative about populism in the United States wherein, from the 1940s onward, it suffers capture by the right. By contrast, the historian Richard Hofstadter tells an ascension narrative about a move from populism to progress.

The conceptualization of populism suggested here allows for a more nuanced account. Populism in the United States contains both democratic and antipolitical elements, each of which receive a greater or lesser emphasis in various contexts.

The antipolitical populism of the Ku Klux Klan, Father Coughlin and the Coughlinites of the late 1930s, McCarthyism, Perot, the Tea Party movement, and the Trump campaign does not exhaust nor define populism. These expressions of populism must be counterpoised with the democratic populism of broad-based community organizations such as the Industrial Areas Foundation, PICO (People Improving Communities through Organizing), the Gamaliel Foundation, and National People’s Action; the development of “community unionism”; and the self-described “new populists” such as Harry Boyte, Heather Booth, and, within the Roman Catholic

Church, Monsignor Geno Baroni. Theological and ecclesial populism of one kind or another has contributed, for better and worse, to the discursive tropes of all of these forms of populism.

What modern conceptions of the people and populism share with theological conceptions and ecclesial embodiments of the people of God is the indeterminacy of representation. How is the will of the people to be communicated? Can the people act directly without mediation, or can they only ever act in part or via duly appointed representatives? If the latter, what is the best way of selecting and legitimizing representatives? And can a people be represented by a single leader, a vanguard, a class of people set apart for that task? Or is it most clearly seen in self-organized popular movements? Must a people, to be a people, be the same *kind* of people, or is a truly democratic people necessarily made up of (and therefore open to) many kinds of persons? Answers to these questions are constantly under negotiation and shape the form and character of a people, both in democratic politics and the ecclesia.

Popular democracy is no panacea in any sphere. There needs to be a tensional and mutually disciplining relationship between democracy and Christianity. Too often congregations pursue works of mercy divorced from any wider forms of political engagement. But corporeal works of mercy (burying the dead, feeding the hungry, and so on) are not just ends in themselves. They are also part of how the church constitutes itself as a body politic characterized by *koinonia* and catholicity. And it is through the formation of healed and fruitful relations within and through congregations that the church in its catholicity contributes to the prevailing social and political order as an order not wholly defined by an unjust status quo.

To move beyond merely sticking Band-Aids on structural problems, churches need to be involved in wider forms of democratic politics. The church's involvement in forms of highly participatory, often agonistic forms of democratic politics is necessary because it forces local churches to recognize their need of others and to own in practice that their welfare is intricately bound up with the welfare of the *demos*—the common people.

Conversely, the congregation, as part of a moral tradition with an eschatological vision of the good, brings a wider horizon of reference and relationship to bear upon the immediate needs and demands of the *demos* (whether in the form of a union, a community-organizing coalition, or a social movement). This mutual disciplining

helps ensure that both congregations and democratic politics (whether place-based or work-based) remain directed toward building a common life rather than toward authoritarian and antidemocratic ends.

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