

# Populism and Democracy<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Before there were any modern democracies, populists pressed for wider popular participation and governmental attention to popular concerns. They were often associated with social upheaval and uncomfortable challenges to property. In response, elites designed modern constitutions mostly along republican lines, allowing some democracy but with limitations on popular will. Populists have resented limits and pressed for greater political inclusion. Populism has also shaped responses to dramatic social changes and disruptions, like recent deindustrialization and abrupt insertion into global capitalism. Populists have advanced legitimate concerns, but also often been willing to abandon constitutional protections for pluralism, minorities, free expression, due process, and even rule of law that distinguish liberal democracy. Sustainable democracy depends not only on popular voice, but also on such protections – and continual renewal of social solidarity and social institutions.

## **Introduction**

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<sup>1</sup> This text is based on the Thesis Eleven Lecture delivered by Craig Calhoun at La Trobe University, May 16, 2017. The lecture was transcribed by Simon Kastberg with revisions from Alonso Casanueva-Baptista and Raul Sanchez Urribarri. It has been revised to reflect the version which served as a keynote speech to the 25th International Congress of Europeanists, in Chicago, March 28, 2018.

‘Populism’ is often a derogatory label for anti-democratic but popular leaders, and for popular voices raised in anger and resentment to condemn elites and politics as usual. But populism is not, in general, an attack on democracy.

First, populism expresses one core dimension of democracy, the will of the people. This can be positive, demanding attention to important issues and potentially expanding political inclusion. But populists purport to speak not just *for* but *as* ‘the people,’ unmediated and whole. Others may point out that the populists of the moment are not even a majority, let alone the whole of the people. The populist response is often just that the other people have not yet awakened to how they are threatened. Or, populists may say, those others are not part of the ‘real’ people. They are elites, or immigrants, or minorities, or deviants, or even enemies of the people. The claim to express a Rousseauian ‘general will’ is typically tendentious.

Second, populism predates democracy. It flourishes in non-democratic societies so long as there is some notion of popular political membership and the idea that political legitimacy might derive at least ultimately from the will or well-being of the people. It can be a demand for more democracy.

Third, claiming to speak directly for the people, populists challenge liberal and republican constitutional provisions. These are intended to achieve greater justice, e.g. by ensuring wide political representation and protecting minorities; to minimize corruption by promoting civic virtue and punishing self-dealing; and to stabilize democracy by ensuring that reflection has a chance to override transitory passions and that winners and losers work together after contentious elections. But the liberal and republican provisions produce a representative rather than direct democracy and a mixed government in which laws, courts, and legislative processes check and limit immediate expressions of popular (or executive) will. They give disproportionate

influence to educated elites and professionals from lawyers and judges to journalists and scientists. On republican principles, these may govern or shape policy on behalf of the whole society. But they add to the frustration of populists when they feel that they are being ignored or even denigrated by elites.

## **Populism Has a Long History**

Many ancient Greek political philosophers thought that all democracy tended toward populism. For this reason, they distrusted it. They thought it would be unstable, driven by resentment and other passions, and vulnerable to demagogues who could transform it into mob rule and then make that a short path to tyranny. Plato took it as exemplary that the citizens of Athens compelled the death of Socrates precisely when they were organized as a democracy.

Greek thinkers typically saw all government as likely to cycle through phases of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy—or worse, their degenerate forms of tyranny, oligarchy, and anarchy or mob rule. But democracy in their eyes was the least stable and most dangerous form of government.<sup>2</sup> Plato, especially, bequeathed this anxiety about democracy to the ensuing centuries of political thought.

While surely not an advocate for unalloyed democracy as practiced in his time, Aristotle saw a greater place for the expression of popular will, or at least recognition of popular grievances against elite monopolization of power and economic resources. He therefore recommended a

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<sup>2</sup> See Ober (2008) for a wider view of democracy in Athens, showing limits to the views of the jaundiced philosophers. It needs to be stressed that even at its most democratic, Athens remained a slave society in which the large majority of residents—including women—were without political voice.

form of political rule that came to be at the center of the republican tradition: mixed government. This is an attempt to stabilize politics by balancing elements from each of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy in a virtuous polity. Jill Frank (2005) describes the result as a “democracy of distinction.” Crucially, it is only partly democracy.

The Roman Republic gave proof that this project could work. It achieved considerable stability with a mixed constitution that gave all citizens the right to participate in electoral decisions, but unequally. Aristocrats had more votes and dominated the Senate and the actual work of government. A faction of *Populares* represented plebeians – commoners - including many farmers. A rationale for this hierarchy was that plebeian citizens were thought less able to prioritize public over private interests and cultivate civic virtue. More complete exclusions affected non-citizens including women and slaves). But there were also ‘tribunes of the people’ to limit the power of the aristocratic Senate and magistrates. This arrangement did not resolve conflict between the different ‘orders’ of citizens, but for 400 years, it tamed it.

The Republic ended in the wake amid civil wars and intrigues. A populist leader, the victorious general Julius Caesar, attempted to seize power, becoming in effect the first Emperor. He was assassinated by rivals with a range of motives, but in the name of defending of the Republic, leaving posterity with an enduring moral drama (familiar to many through Shakespeare who examined it in ways directly relevant to his era). The Republic had become corrupt, chaotic, and disorganized. But writing in self-imposed exile, the aristocratic former consul and philosopher Cicero gave enduring articulation to republican ideals even as the Republic died.

Empire and monarchy (including the peculiar combination of imperial and monarchical elements in the Catholic Church) dominated Western European political structures through the middle ages. The republican tradition lived on only in urban enclaves. At larger scale, there was no

attempt to organize public affairs through citizenship. Memories of local rather than distant kings and in some places 'tribal' notions of self-government were kept alive and later could inform Romantic nationalism as well as populist calls for voice and self-rule. But most people were simply subjects, with no voice in larger polities, with limited autonomy to self-organize at very local levels.

Feudal hierarchy was imposed with different degrees of severity. There was more freedom in Western Europe than the institutions of serfdom allowed in the East. Ethnic and regional solidarities underpinned opposition to consolidation of monarchical rule – as for example Anglo-Saxon England resented the 'Yoke' of Norman domination. Thus King Arthur mythically ruled with his Knights of the Round Table not simply over them. The Lords who got King John to sign the Magna Carta in 1215 secured protections and liberties for themselves and for the Church – and at least in principle greater rule of law - but nothing like a republican government. Outside cities, neither citizenship nor a notion of public was prominent.

Common people might attempt to avoid military service, resist specific impositions of power, or even on occasion rebel. They wanted to be treated in ways they considered right. But they did not claim inclusion in a political public because there was none. In that significant sense, they were not populists. Not only rulers but people throughout the social hierarchy understood political authority to be a matter of divine right, legitimate inheritance, or sometimes conquest - not popular will or well-being. This changed in the early modern period.

As some Italian city-states grew wealthy from banking and trade, their elites renewed the old Roman struggle between central power and republican citizenship. The Florentine Republic, for example, was dominated by aristocratic families joined together by a strong ethos of mutual restraint and a normative order forbidding corruption—on pain of death!—and demanding that

all officeholders be clearly committed to the public good over private interest. The Republic thrived on the basis of trade and banking and Florence grew into a major center of art, literature, and learning—the Italian Renaissance. However, the richest Florentine banking family, the Medicis, made their wealth the basis for enough political power to supplant the Republic (and indeed to engage in politics beyond the city, even eventually securing control of the papacy). This establishment of something close to monarchy was a defeat for republican ideals of government by citizens. But it should not be thought that the Florentine Republic was a democracy, since only some 3,000 of Florence’s perhaps 50,000 residents were entitled to vote. Corruption and inequality brought a populist sense of grievance among those who lived in the city but were not granted much say in its governance. Simultaneously, Florence was threatened by an invading army under Charles VII of France.

In this context of domestic and external threats, the Dominican Friar Girolamo Savonarola became perhaps the first modern populist leader. His followers expelled the Medicis and established a ‘popular’ republic. This relied on election to popular office with an expanded proportion of Florentines able to participate, notably, artisans, who had previously been excluded, were enfranchised. At the same time, Savonarola was always prepared to call his followers into the streets and bolstered by this extra-institutional pressure. He could be dictatorial and expect acclamation rather than debate from elections. Promising essentially to Make Florence Great Again —“richer, more powerful, more glorious than ever”—he launched a puritanical campaign against the decadence of both elite secular society and the Church (Weinstein 2011). Processions through the city culminated in “bonfires of the vanities” burning books, paintings, fashionable clothes, and even cosmetics. This brought down the wrath of the

rich and of the Church. Savonarola was excommunicated and in due course executed. The Medicis regained power.

The travails of early modern Florence are especially prominent in political thought because they were the context and focus for the work of Niccolò Machiavelli, the first modern political theorist.<sup>3</sup> His enormously influential work is subject to numerous competing interpretations, not least because he explored both the potential to adapt and renew Roman Republicanism to make a virtuous polity and the best strategy for a leader whose concerns were with power not virtue – or, to follow Pocock (2016), with stabilizing rather than reforming the polity. Machiavelli served both the Florentine Republic and the Medicis, and wrote his most famous book, *The Prince*, hoping to gain a more prominent position with the Medicis. Neither a democrat nor a populist, he was nonetheless in agreement with much of Savonarola’s program, including replacing hereditary government with elections, expanding political participation in the Republic, and trying to curb corruption. But he saw politics under the priest as rooted too much in passion and too little in reason. This made him dependent on crowds. He “was ruined with his new order of things immediately the multitude believed in him no longer” (Machiavelli 2015, Book VI). Crucially, Savonarola lacked the capacity to stabilize the polity and secure its defense from external threats, both of which were necessary to enjoying the benefits of a reformed republic. In the background to the drama of Machiavelli’s Florence was the disunity of fragmented Italy and its weakness before foreign invaders. Venice and Genoa were maritime powers, and trade linked the Renaissance city-states throughout the Mediterranean and on to Asia, the European North, and impressively much of the world. Contact with Arab civilization helped spark the

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<sup>3</sup> For this context, see Strathern (2016).

intellectual Renaissance, both because they had preserved Greek thought that Europeans had lost and because of their own innovations. Trade helped the Italian city-states grow rich and this wealth supported art and architecture. For all the homages done to Greek and Roman antiquity, writing in Italian grew more prominent, not least in the work of Machiavelli himself. But there was no Italian state and little political coordination. The republican model worked at the level of cities not countries. The Church maintained a huge political role in Italy, even as its grip declined in Northern Europe. But the Pope was not able to defend himself, let alone Italy. Corruption in the Church made it less effective in worldly power struggles, ironically, even while the attention of many in the church hierarchy came to be more focused on material ends and less on God. Martin Luther's critique of corruption in the Church came a mere 20 years after Savonarola. He nailed his 95 theses to the door of Wittenburg castle church in 1517 (at least according to legend).

The ensuing Protestant Reformation and related wars of religion helped to make the modern European states and nations. Reading the Bible promoted literacy in vernacular languages. Citizen armies encouraged identification among 'the people' of countries in a way mercenary armies couldn't (as indeed Machiavelli himself noted in *The Prince*). Efforts to administer religion proceeded alongside administration of trade and taxation and the marshaling of resources for war. Northern Europe grew richer and the cultural life of its cities flourished in a continuation of the Renaissance. But countries remained kingdoms even as they also became far-flung empires. This combined trade and resource extraction with a new theater for competition among European states and missions to save souls. The story vastly exceeds our current scope, but two conclusions are crucial.

First, the scale of political and social integration was transformed. As the modern state was consolidated, the modern ‘nation’ appeared as the corresponding embodiment of ‘the people.’ States were not the whole story, of course, as economies and cultures were increasingly organized in national structures.

Second, the place of individual choice in social participation was transformed. From the spread of literacy and increasing education to wider social mobility to religious emphasis on personal salvation to the rise of entrepreneurship, on the one hand, and a consumer society, on the other hand, a much wider range of people claimed distinctive individual identities and the right to make choices based on them.

Which came first, nation or state, was and is a moot point. There was a prior history to what became modern national identities. An ‘ascending’ view of political authority had ancient roots in the ‘folk moot’ and other pre-feudal assemblies and these had spokespeople to claim them (and eventually poets and composers to celebrate them).<sup>4</sup> This combination of history and myth was complemented by new cultural production shaping the European nations (as eventually others). But throughout Europe, political thinkers also laid claim to “the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome” and to the republican tradition of citizen government.<sup>5</sup> Modern democratic politics is shaped by both the solidarity of nations (and perceived threats to it) and formal constitutions and institutions with their rights and procedures. Ideally complementary,

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<sup>4</sup> See Otto von Guericke’s account of descending and ascending models of political authority in *Political Theories of the Middle Ages* (1987 [1900]).

<sup>5</sup> Poe’s poem that contains the famous phrase, is itself testimony to the classicism that informed the cultural aspirations of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe and North America.

these are sometimes in tension. Partly because of its emphasis on individuals, liberalism is closely identified with formal institutions. Populism more often articulates the solidarity of nations.

In 17th-century England, the contest between monarchy and aristocracy was replayed in a Civil War. Religious struggles were part and parcel of politics and vice versa. Cromwell arguably played the part of Savonarola, though the analogy is imperfect. But Cromwell's New Model Army was in part a populist representation of The People. Arguably, the people were more often off-stage in the Civil War drama, with different more elite political figures either threatening to call them in or denouncing this possibility (see Morgan 1989). But in addition to the populist elements in mainstream Parliamentarianism, there were Levelers and Diggers and others who proclaimed the rights and needs of the people (Hill 1984). And there was what J.G.A. Pocock has called 'the Machiavellian moment' (Pocock 2016). This is the point at which promotion of a new and better republican constitution, including one open to more of 'the people,' confronts the need for institutional capacity to achieve stability and security. But this is also a moment of risk that capacity for leadership can bring a shift from democracy to dictatorship. Caesar's story informed the widespread notion that democracy would be but a waystation on the path to tyranny.

Democracy still remained a radical idea in the late 18th century, when the founders of the US enshrined democracy in its Constitution. Overall, the text is more indebted to republicanism, but it does begin with the very populist invocation of 'We the People.' Democratic demands from below had long been growing, but this was the first large-scale acceptance of democracy by an educated, propertied, elite.

Many among the founders were strong republicans and reluctant democrats. Some, like John Adams, were close readers of Machiavelli. Particularly in the South, desires for limits on direct

popular action were strong. In an abundance of caution, the US founders restricted the vote to free men with property. Slaves, women, and most of the working classes were initially excluded. They protected the rule of law with a strong judiciary, including judges with lifetime appointments. They gave Senators longer terms than other congressional representatives seeking to establish a reflective elite more able to take a long-term view. Not least, they almost immediately amended the Constitution with a Bill of Rights protecting pluralism, minorities, and public action outside government control. In addition to stability, they sought security, both for property and in relation to external threats. Though much of this comes from the republican tradition rather than liberalism per se, it is more or less what is meant today by liberal democracy.

Still, even if anxious, the founders' embrace of democracy was remarkable. They called for much more popular participation in and guidance of government than any other country allowed at the time. They also set in motion an uneven but ongoing deepening of democracy that gradually reduced restrictions on popular participation. This didn't happen smoothly. It took waves of popular agitation and social movements, including not least recurrent populism. Indeed, some say that the US really became a democracy only with the Andrew Jackson's populist presidential election in 1828.<sup>6</sup> For the first time, a majority of white men had the chance to vote.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Samuel Huntington (1991) dates his account of the 'first wave' of modern democracy to Jackson's election in 1828.

<sup>7</sup> Donald Trump has been vocal in his praise for Jackson. They are not similar in all ways, but it is noteworthy the extent to which Trump's base, like Jackson's, is animated by the idea that America should be white and traditional gender roles enforced. Jackson's brutality in displacing or killing Native Americans anticipated Trump's attempts to keep America white by blocking immigration and his use of a rhetoric of 'security' to support this.

Jackson had enormous personal appeal, not least as a general victor over both the British and the native Americans with whom the US shared the continent. He rode a wave of populism rooted in the greater inclusion of ordinary citizens as voters.<sup>8</sup> His famously rowdy presidential campaigns helped make politics a spectator sport. They were framed both as appeals to the common man and as criticisms of a corrupt aristocracy. He charged, in essence, both that there wasn't enough democracy and that existing democracy had degenerated.

Like many populists, Jackson played to one image of the people, implying that this was the only possible one. Famous for his war exploits against the Indian tribes of the interior South, once in office, Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act of 1830. And though he personally worried about the growing tensions over slavery, he presided over growing political polarization, especially over slavery. He remained active after leaving the presidency and supported bringing Texas into the Union as a slave state—a move that increased tensions. As often happens, agents of inclusion on one dimension are voices for exclusion on others.

The French Revolution followed the US one in short order and was significantly more radical in its embrace of the equality of citizens. But though it produced the powerful democratic slogan, *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, it did not prove stable. It contained its own drama of elite republican reformers pressed to play to the emergent political force of The People – sometimes with democracy and sometimes with violence.

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<sup>8</sup> The founding of the Democratic Party in 1828 was part of a shift from seeing parties as shifting factions and coalitions to seeing them more as enduring formal organizations. This reflected growing societal scale and complexity, and an early stage in the increasing professionalization and mediatization of politics that has continued into the present day. It did not stop shifts in party composition, appeal, and ideological orientation.

Both liberal and conservative political traditions derive in part from observing that it did not adequately protect liberty. The conservative tradition also emphasizes the extent to which the French Revolution failed to protect fraternity, that is the solidarity of citizens, especially in families and communities. Radical and socialist traditions join conservatives in asserting the importance of solidarity and criticizing liberals for allowing versions of liberty to be corrosive of social cohesion. Of course, socialists and conservatives have different ideas about how to secure solidarity and especially how it relates to economic life. Socialists, conservatives, and liberals differ on the virtue of equality.

From both the mostly positive US example and the degeneration of the French Revolution into terror, the most successful builders of modern democracies drew the conclusion that democracy should be only part of a democratic constitution, not the whole. In any case, many argued, in a large-scale and complex society, government would necessarily be carried out by formal organizations led by an elite, not a matter for direct participation of all the people. The main democratic process was choosing the elite, not running the government. Democracy would be representative, not direct, and it would require stable institutions not constant mass mobilization. But it was also a democratic process to protest when elites failed to act in the interests of all citizens.

## **The Present Wave**

The present wave of populism comes after 50 years in which ruling elites tolerated and often personally benefitted from economic transformations that did not reflect popular will or serve to benefit ordinary people: rising financialization, globalization organized largely to benefit corporations and capital, abrupt deindustrialization. Of course, these transformations also

brought gains – not least a variety of new technologies. But they left individual lives, families, and communities devastated. It was salt in the wound that the elites called this progress and called those who resisted or complained backward.

The dominant political elites of this whole period were more or less liberal. There were conflicts between political parties, but policy differences were muted. Ostensibly socialist or social democratic parties stopped seeking deep economic transformation. Conservatives were not reactionary opponents of democracy or the liberal order. Indeed, one of the staples of the period was reference to ‘post-ideological’ politics (see Berkowitz in this volume for a further discussion of this issue). All major parties embraced the basic project of liberal democracy, including pluralism and rule of law. All embraced the basic marriage of liberal democracy to capitalism. They differed mainly on how much they wanted to extend liberal rights in a project of pluralist inclusion—of women, minorities (including immigrants), and alternative lifestyles or personal identities.

The ‘mainstream’ parties of Western democracies were more committed to economic growth than to equality. They supported finance-led globalization, embracing the project of competitiveness even when it meant curtailing social spending and trying to limit unions. Most were influenced by neoliberalism, an ideology that proclaimed liberty to be rooted in private property and insisted that government efforts to use tax revenues to improve social conditions were an illegitimate intrusion on these private rights.<sup>9</sup> They were more attentive to the progress

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<sup>9</sup> In the private sector, neoliberals insisted that projects of ‘corporate social responsibility’ were an illegitimate use of profits that should belong only to the owners of corporations. Other liberals argued for a broader recognition of legitimate stakeholders, including employees, suppliers and customers, and the communities in which businesses were located.

of wealth, as measured, for example, by stock market indices, than to the welfare of those whose lives were disrupted by the path of growing wealth—for example, workers who lost both their jobs and their communities to deindustrialization. They embraced the growing power of finance, the idea of free markets, including free trade, and globalization.

There were differences among parties on specific issues, and sometimes sharp conflicts. In the UK, for example, Thatcherite Tories were committed to destroying unions and Labour was not, though Labour didn't do much to reverse the slide in union strength. Labour didn't pursue privatization as Tories had done, though it didn't undo it either or regulate finance as much as it might have. Labour did improve benefits for senior citizens. Austerity was a distinctively conservative imposition. In the US, Republicans undermined government agencies more (though government budgets still grew). They more actively denigrated the idea of public action to serve public interests, but even Democrats were also usually closer to Wall Street than unions. Perhaps the biggest difference was in judicial appointments with litmus tests for issues like abortion rights. In neither country did either leading party attempt serious reversal of growing inequality. Nor did those in most other developed capitalist countries—though as Thomas Piketty (2014) has shown, France did limit inequality more than most and for a longer time.

Populism is largely a complaint against the conduct of government by these liberal elites. It is not just a grievance against inequality and the existence of elites. It centers on the charge that liberal elites were poor stewards of the overall collective good. It complains bitterly that the conventional governing classes of all major parties lived well while others suffered and spoke of progress, while others bore the costs of change. And crucially, say the populists, those elites didn't care about us, listen to us, or even recognize fully that we existed and had a legitimate

stake in the country. Populist charges against established elites are often unfair. They underestimate pressures and limits and indeed accomplishments. But they are not entirely false. Populism is typically angry, resentful, reactionary, and illiberal. It can be a problem *for* democracy, but this is not because it is inherently undemocratic. It is because immediate representation of (ostensible) popular will is at odds with institutional arrangements that stabilize democracy and secure greater justice. Such institutional arrangements produce the hybrid political form commonly labeled liberal democracy (though in fact they derive at least as much from republicanism as liberalism). Populists are almost essentially illiberal; they refuse to prioritize the liberties and rights of individuals or smaller groups over popular will and what they understand to unite the people. Their anger at elites is often based on the view that those elites have put minorities ahead of the majority, and that they have managed public affairs to secure their own benefit more than that of the real ‘people’ of a country.

Populist anger has many sources, from economic grievances to a sense of cultural insult. Claiming and inflaming this anger is the stock-in-trade of populist demagogues from Donald Trump to Marine Le Pen to Victor Orban—or their more Leftist counterparts. Rightwing versions of populism are dominant in the present era, but Leftwing populism has been important in Spain and Greece. It is present among supporters of Brexit and of France’s Yellow Vests.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, populism is more of a political style than it is a political ideology. In itself, it is neither Leftwing nor Rightwing. But it can be harnessed to Left-Right politics and co-opted by more conventional political parties and agendas.

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<sup>10</sup> For a direct comparison of anti-system politics from both the left and the right across Western democracies, see Hopkin and Blyth in this volume.

When Hungary's Orban named his populist regime 'illiberal democracy,' he was playing rhetorical games, but he was not all wrong.<sup>11</sup> His regime did command widespread popular support. But it not only represented largely a non-metropolitan Hungary against more cosmopolitan Budapest, it was deeply engaged in manipulating public opinion. It offered only a very thin version of democracy, the chance to offer the regime popular acclaim and plebiscitarian approval. To shout 'Hurrah' or 'Lock them up' when opponents are mentioned, or to vote merely 'Yes' or 'No,' is not to participate seriously in government, policy-making, or organizing life together.

Populists have many targets, from professional elites to immigrants to foreigners exerting undue influence over their nations. Politicians may pander to pre-existing senses of grievance or they may seek to persuade populists to adopt targets of their own alongside those with deeper roots among ordinary people. Specific grievances and resentments differ among countries. Indeed, populism is always so embedded in the specifics of different national contexts, time periods, and relationships to mainstream politics that there are serious limits to trying—as I do here—to discuss populism in general. Nonetheless, there are also common themes and there is an inverse potential error in discussing each instance of populist mobilization only inside a particular national story and set of symbolic references. Throughout modernity, populism has been shaped by shared patterns in international political economy, demographic transitions like urbanization and immigration, and ever more intensive networks of communication.

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<sup>11</sup> Orban sometimes renders this "illiberal Christian democracy" ([www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-orban/hungarian-pm-sees-shift-to-illiberal-christian-democracy-in-2019-european-vote-idUSKBN1KI0BK](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-orban/hungarian-pm-sees-shift-to-illiberal-christian-democracy-in-2019-european-vote-idUSKBN1KI0BK)). See Atanassow, Krastev, and Plattner in this volume for further elaboration of this issue.

Very commonly, liberalism itself is among populists' targets, as well as specific liberal elites. The rights liberals defend can seem like special treatment for minorities. In the decades since the 1970s, liberals focused more on cultural inclusion than on economic welfare. Many liberals defended a disempowering economic order on the grounds that it had roots in private property rights. Too many embraced globalization uncritically, as though it derived simply from legal equality and sheer modernity. They looked the other way as finance-led reorganization of global capitalism benefitted investors more than workers and eroded place-based communities and whole regions through deindustrialization. And when financial crisis struck, they spent billions of dollars rescuing banks and other companies but not helping people who lost homes, savings, or jobs in the crisis.

Liberals may not have been the primary drivers of these disasters, but they were among beneficiaries as well as blinded by the hegemonic ideology of the day. Not surprisingly, this encouraged populist resentment. This is often expressed in unfortunate ways, like protesting against public health measures in the coronavirus pandemic. But the distrust of liberal messages about what is best for the public good has reasons.

It is easy to talk about 'liberal elites' who mismanaged democratic government. We can imagine we mean others: elected representatives, people richer and more influential than us. Perhaps these do bear more responsibility and deserve more blame. But it is important to realize that most of 'us'—that is to say, educated, mainly middle-class participants in the political public sphere—have been complicit. We have allowed our societies to grow more hierarchical—with universities in the lead. We used what resources we had to fight for our own positions in the hierarchies, while many of our fellow citizens found their opportunities much more severely blocked. We have embraced the attractively 'cosmopolitan' side of globalization and paid less

attention to the domination of financial capitalism. Indeed, we embraced a certain cosmopolitan style and attitude that made it harder for us even to see what was going on in the damaged communities of those whose style was not so sleek or educated or globally cultured or dignified. As members of this privileged class, we were at ease talking about progress and feeling confident in it. This was reinforced when we saw things getting better in many ways. Partly, looking close to home, we saw an improvement in our living standards. We grew more likely to own houses; cars grew fancier; we enjoyed a rush of new consumer technologies (though sometimes we might be uncomfortable to realize how much all of this was based on debt). We lived mostly in places where we were not confronted directly by the downsides of either deindustrialization or globalization. But at least as basically, we focused on those gains that could be achieved without limiting economic growth or challenging the extent to which it was organized to advance wealth accumulation. Specifics, of course, varied with national context, but there were major and important gains in equality of opportunity on lines of gender, race, sexual orientation, differential ability, and other dimensions. These co-existed, however, with dramatic increases in overall inequality. We let returns on invested assets define national prosperity more than earned incomes and standards of living.

Educated professionals may not have been the cause of the inequality, damaged communities, and other downsides to the era of neoliberal globalization. Many of us were at least sympathetic to Left populist critiques such as that of the Occupy movements, if not active in pursuing structural change. So, we were shocked to find ourselves the face of the problem and focus of resentment for Rightwing populists. But when there is support for upper-class politicians who say “we have had enough of experts” who else is being targeted?

If experts really deserve their status and salary, critics suggest, they should have seen the mess their fellow citizens were in and fixed it. This is a disingenuous charge coming from someone like Michael Gove, an Oxford-educated Conservative Minister and author, who declared during the Brexit campaign that “people in this country have had enough of experts.”<sup>12</sup> But it is a charge that resonates with many less elite citizens who sense that the educated professional class looks down on the mostly non-metropolitan kinds of citizens drawn to populism.<sup>13</sup> Centrally, populists complain that elites—including experts—do not value and pay attention to the opinions of ordinary citizens—though this would be democratic.

Accelerating inequality is one of the causes of populism, though this does not mean that all populists see equality as the solution. While populists on the Left are commonly egalitarian, those more on the Right often see the issue not as inequality, but as who gets the good positions in an unequal system. They complain that liberals and experts have been behind distributing more of opportunities (like elite university admissions) and more of benefits (like good jobs) to minorities, immigrants, and women. It has been hard for liberals to realize that what they regard as successes like more equal opportunity seem like affronts to those who believe that they have a prior right to the relevant opportunities. But mainstream liberals have not been consistently egalitarian. Many accepted radically unequal access to educational and other institutions, seeking to ensure only that the inequality did not derive from certain protected categories like race or gender. They saw this as a matter of merit, not money or privilege (and ignored the possibility of

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<sup>12</sup> H.Mance, “Britain has had enough of experts, says Gove,” *Financial Times*, June 3, 2016.

<https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c>

<sup>13</sup> This is a prominent observation of sympathetic studies; see Hochschild (2018).

creating less hierarchical institutions). The liberal focus has typically been on fairness in allocating unequal opportunities, not on how much inequality there should be. Implicitly, they have accepted that so long as ‘merit’ determines access, scarcity in quality provision is acceptable. In somewhat different national packages, they have allowed education and health to be treated as private rather than public goods.

Critics of minorities and immigrants commonly stress the burden on welfare systems. But at least as important to populists are perceived blocks on upward mobility. Immigrant and minority success stories do not alleviate the concern but exacerbate it. As those Arlie Hochschild interviewed for *Strangers in their Own Land* put it, it’s like these new claimants are cutting in line, but that’s who liberals support.<sup>14</sup>

Populism is not inherently an ideology of Left or Right. It is a rhetoric of complaint against elites and self-assertion of ‘the people’ that can be drawn more in one way or the other. “We are the 99%” is as populist a slogan as “We are the Real Americans.” The former is more centrally a critique of the power of wealth; the latter is obviously more explicitly national, and thus more easily linked to racism and hostility to immigrants. But both are claims to the importance and solidarity of The People. Populist movements are generally not composed of veteran politicians or policy wonks. They tend to be stronger on complaints than concrete policy proposals. They may develop more of these from within if they become well-organized enough and last long enough. The Farmers Alliance did in the late 19th-century US.<sup>15</sup> More commonly, political parties and ideologues with more resources try to harness populists to their causes. And a

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> See Lawrence Goodwyn (1976), a valuable corrective to many common views of populism.

weakness of populist movements is the frequency with which they are claimed and mobilized, and manipulated by demagogues. Indeed, being motivated in part by the sense of being ignored or denigrated by one set of elites, populists are all too vulnerable to other elites who flatter them with attention—from Peron to Trump.

## **The Ambiguous People**

Populism is not a precise analytic concept. It is a political term that is used as an accusation as often as it is claimed by ostensible populists. Sometimes, people say “I’m a populist. I speak for the people. I speak in the name of the people.” But more often the label ‘populist’ is applied to those seen as violating the norms of conventional liberal democracy. It is applied to people held to be emotional rather than rational. It is a charge of having failed to appreciate complexity. The accusation of “populist” is likely to be made by those who believe in the knowledge of experts and seek a reasoned, rational debate on policy questions. These are hallmarks of liberal and republican thoughts added to democracy to improve it. But they do privilege some modes of participation in politics, and not the most popular.<sup>16</sup>

The moral standing of The People remains important. It is, however, more complicated than often acknowledged. Is there *a* singular people? Do we mean *some* people? *Most* of the people? What is the representation of the people that is involved? Often, appeals to The People are in truth appeals in the name of *all* the people against *some* of the people. But there are other moral claims. The native-born may claim to be the real people against immigrants. Youth may claim to

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<sup>16</sup> See the Introduction to this volume for a further discussion of the term populism and infelicities surrounding its use in recent debates.

be the morally significant people because they will live the future—and, say, face the potential devastations of climate change. The elites who are betraying the rest of the people, or those standing in the way of necessary action are seen to be legitimately excluded from the salient sense of The People.

In this reliance on ‘we the people,’ populism is often closely related to nationalism. Though populism and nationalism overlap, each appears in many forms and attached to many different ideologies. They overlap but are not identical. Nationalism shapes diplomatic relations and trade conflicts that are in no sense populist. Populist rhetoric informs local appeals against central states. Throughout the modern era, however, nationalism has been the primary rhetoric for appeals to citizen solidarity and rights at the scale of states—which are not surprisingly often described as nation-states. This can be as readily the basis for domestic projects, like providing early childhood or old-age benefits to a whole nation without discrimination, as for international rivalry or conflict. Demagogues too often find it easy to link nationalist and populist domestic solidarities to international enmities—mobilized against other countries or against immigrants. Nationalism is sometimes bellicose, and populist resentments can exacerbate this. Frustratingly, for those who would like good and bad dimensions of social life to remain more neatly separate, domestic solidarity may be enhanced by mobilization for war.

Populist politics are likewise rooted in an appeal not just to the people as a population but to the people as legitimate participants in a way of life.<sup>17</sup> The shared culture and social order makes a

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<sup>17</sup> Here, there is an echo of Tocqueville’s point that democracy is not simply a political system but a way of life (Tocqueville 2003 [1835/1840]). See Atanassow in this volume for a fuller articulation of a Tocquevillian response to recent illiberal movements.

whole people rather than a series of individuals. It extends from families and local communities to the nation. It also reduces any potential sense of contradiction in excluding culturally or racially different fellow citizens from the category of the real people. There is a special pathos to this point today as many aggrieved citizens imagine the disappearance of people like them. From white nationalists to Evangelical Christians to True Finns, to Englishmen who fear the loss of Britain and those like the former Trump advisor Steve Bannon who see the eclipse of the West on the horizon, there is a widespread anxiety about the disappearance of ways of life—and populist identification of The People with these ways of life.

What populists seek to protect and advance cannot be reduced to either a particular set of people at one moment in time, or their material interests. Populists do have material grievances, of course, but populism is not merely a form of interest group politics. Indeed, populists typically reject interest group politics as little more than bargaining among elites. Its implicit logic of arithmetically counting the interests of individuals or responding only to organized power-groups downplays the politics of loyalties and values.

The oppositions of trade unions to business, urban to rural areas, young to old do have some predictive power in explaining who is more drawn to populist campaigns. Those organizing campaigns are realistic and know where to hold rallies and what symbols to invoke. But populist rhetoric tends to downplay these interest groupings. These imply legitimate divisions among the people, rather than populism's more typical distinction between the real people, as a whole, and others. They also imply a politics of compromises and diversity, which is not the populist style. Contemporary populism is not just the national story of the US or France or Britain or Australia or Hungary or any other country. It is a shared story of this moment in globalization when there is a lot of pushback from people who feel that it is not working for them; when destabilizing

socioeconomic change is causing fundamental problems. For both populists and nationalists, these problems put pressure on who 'we' are. They make 'us' ask: What is happening to our way of life? Will our children live in societies that are recognizably still the kind of societies that we know? Will they have opportunities and will they be prepared to seize them? When people think that maybe their children will be losing out, they tend to ask who is winning. In fact, a feature of populist politics is often a search for scapegoats or the people who are winning that should not be, or who are winning more than they should be. The scapegoat search is not a neutral analysis; it is largely constructed in first person terms. It is an effort to identify those who are getting ahead at 'my' expense or that of people like me. Material issues are entwined with cultural. It is misleading to ask whether the issues are mainly inequality or mainly the 'values' and 'identity' concerns of 'culture wars'. They are both at once, each exacerbating anxieties with roots in the other. It is not that poor people join populist campaigns because elites are rich. Many have been baffled by the enthusiasm for a billionaire like Donald Trump when people simultaneously complain about the injustice of inequality. For some this may be a cynical evaluation of what politician is most likely to address their issues. For many it is an expression of contempt for politics as usual. But it is also important to recognize that populists who do not like the professional classes may nonetheless respect rich people. They have something ordinary people want and perhaps can imagine having. It is harder to identify with those whose standing is based on education, professional attainment, and cultural polish.

Populists rhetorically appeal to The People – as though the referent is clear. But of course the mental image is culturally constructed, in processes that are not at all transparent. The People is never just a counting of votes, or an accurate representation of the various plural and differentiated groups in modern societies. The People becomes particularly important in contexts

of polarization, where people live in somewhat different versions of the same country. There is a geography to it, as well as an element of social differentiation that makes it such that people do not just bump into people with different views. A common feature of the 2016 US Presidential election, the Brexit campaign, and others was the number of people who said: “I don’t even know anyone who voted the other way.” In the case of Brexit, there were a number of people in the North-East of Britain and certain generational and occupational groups who did not know anyone who was voting to stay in the European Union (EU). Conversely, there were a number of people in London who did not know anyone who was voting to leave the EU.

The same thing was true in the US, and it is important to reflect about why this happened. Thirty years ago, there was a viewership of a small number of television channels that would broadcast things like the evening news. People might have complained that it was all pretty much the same: ABC, NBC, and CBS showed the same news. The anchor person would have been different but equally centrist. What has happened over time is the decline of the audience for that kind of newscast and the rise of other kinds of much more differentiated channels so that different people could get different accounts of the news. This shapes what I have called “parallel media worlds.” We live different versions of our countries, getting different news stories, even though we are still in the same nation. Geographical division has reinforced class, ethnic, political, and other views. The US has its blue and red states—and insulting terms like “flyover communities.” In Britain, London became an even richer and more diverse global center, while much of the rest of the country—ex-industrial or ex-agricultural—declined. *La France profonde* is angry at Paris. Budapest is a cosmopolitan city resented by much of Hungary.

Steve Bannon, the former editor of the Rightwing website Breitbart and one-time senior advisor to President Trump, has been active in weaving an alternative narrative. This combines anxiety

about the rise of China and America's declining global power with the notion of an end to Christian civilization and the argument that white people are threatened with 'substitution'. He says that the mainstream liberal press—the New York *Times* narrative of what it means to be an American—is deceitful. This is part of the Donald Trump story: “They are lying to you, here is the truth.” The demagogues may pander to prejudices, instead of trying to give you a factual account, an account rooted in social science to possibly correct received opinions. They may play on them and build on them, promote a paranoid world view, or, what goes on most of the time, position real legitimate concerns and problems that people have in tendentious and not-so-realistic accounts of why they have those problems. In this context, populism is a sort of wake-up call, but it is not a program. One of the things we know in the case of Trump, Brexit, and other cases is that populists in power often do not have a full set of policies.

Populism is a politics of grievances, not of aspirations. It is about what has gone wrong, more than a program for what should go right. Yes, there is a program of America first, or Australia, or France... There may be a nationalist program in that sense. But not a detailed program. It is not a plan. To look for the plan that is going to lift people economically in populist politics is to misunderstand, to think that it is a set of policy proposals rather than this more emotional reflection of grievances. It is a defensive and often resentful response to the state of the world.

Populist identity claims may have historical roots, but they also involve accentuating differences from denigrated others. Resentment is a problematic guide: it leads people to focus on what they do not have rather than what they do, or on past injustices and not ways forward.

Having a legitimate grievance does not necessarily give one a reasonable analysis or a sensible view of where to go. Donald Trump spoke to widespread anger about deindustrialization and job loss when he claimed to save an air conditioner factory in Indiana by talking to its owners and

providing a federal subsidy. This was advertised as bringing jobs back from Mexico. But in fact the subsidy sustained the factory as it was automated. Machinery rather than globalization still put workers out of work. Transformation of labor markets in the world's richer economies did involve internationalization in search of lower-wage work, but also long, computer-managed supply chains not just the transplanting of individual factories. It was accompanied domestically by increased automation and a massive shift from industrial to service jobs. These were often less well-paid and less supported by unions. Crucially, they generally went to different people, not least women rather than men. In this transition, the interests of capital dominated over those of labor. There was too little retraining, too little support for stricken communities.

Manufacturing industry provided good jobs from the period of World War II to the 1970s when they began to erode, country after country. They were not all wonderful jobs, but relatively well paid, secure jobs. Deindustrialization could have been addressed as a high-priority problem in each country. Mitigating damages could have been at the top of policy agendas. The destruction of communities—and lives—could have been minimized, the coming of an opiate epidemic averted. Instead, elites focused more on the winners of the story: global investment bankers and traders and people with computer science degrees or shares in Google or Apple.

Populism reflects a collapse in trust – among ordinary people as well as in the government.

Distrust among 'the people' is reflected in extremes of political polarization. But interpersonal trust has also declined. The coronavirus pandemic spurs gun-buying in the US because people do not trust their fellow-citizens.<sup>18</sup> And at the same time, trust in the government has fallen sharply

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<sup>18</sup> This process did not start with the recent wave of populism, nor with the financial crisis, nor indeed with the 9/11 attacks. It reflects longer-term transformations in citizen experience and public communication (see Meyers 2008).

in almost every advanced democracy. In the US, trust in government has fallen from approximately 60% to 20%, whereas in Norway, it has fallen from around 95% to 75% (Pew Research Center 2019). There are places where people trust the government more, but overall, there has been a widespread loss of trust (either due to corruption or lack of recognition). A key feature of this trend is the loss of trust and faith in conventional political parties. The political party system is in large part broken. It is not just that people think that one party is bad and the other is good; they don't think that any of them really speak to what they need and want. They think that the political parties are all full of people just seeking to benefit themselves or that they are representing other people, not them; or that they have made so many compromises that you cannot distinguish their stances. Multiparty parliamentary democracies work well when parties forge compromises, bring groups of people together, all of whom will get some of what they want and none of whom will get everything they want. In this way, they cooperate in order to achieve electoral majorities. This is becoming a less common feature of the party system. France offers an extreme example. Emmanuel Macron essentially ran as an independent against all parties. Whatever else his victory meant, it was very bad for the way French democracy had previously worked. Now, no established political party is responsible for working together to solve problems.

## **Conclusion**

We, educated elites, spend too much of our time being angry at populists and not enough time being angry at the betrayal of the broad public interest by governing and economic elites in our societies. To address any of these issues would require us to rebuild social solidarity and to rebuild the cohesion of our societies. There is no addressing it by simply making a new political

announcement. It would take rebuilding the current political system from the ground up: having moral economies and (re-)introducing the idea that there can be moral and social values in the economy. There is no law of nature that says that the economy must be approached with no analytic metric besides profit and the accumulation of capital. Why can't it be approached by asking whether it creates jobs? Why can't it be approached by asking whether it creates good jobs for people? Why can't it be approached by asking whether the economy delivers on social and moral solidarity in society? Well, it can be; it just isn't most of the time or hasn't been approached this way in the past 40 years.

Though the scale and durability of modern democracy are new, the very word incorporates an old ambiguity. *Demos* is the Greek word for the people. But it can be used to refer to all the people—the way the framers of the US Constitution claimed to speak as ‘We the People’—or it can be an elite reference to the lower classes, the ordinary people, the commoners who were not normally powerful and influential participants in government. Populism derives from the distance between the two usages. Populists seek to bridge the gap, to transform democracy run by elites into democracy run by all the people. In doing so, they often abandon the protections of pluralism, minorities, free expression, due process, and even rule of law that distinguish liberal democracy. But populists are not intrinsically anti-democratic. And waves of populism are commonly responses to genuine failures of the ruling elites to act with appropriate consideration for ordinary people, or indeed, to listen.

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