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Populism, Politics and Democracy

SIR BERNARD CRICK

The spectre of populism haunts modern democracies. Can it be avoided in modern conditions of a consumption-driven society and its dumbing down by the media? Democracy itself has two aspects: individual liberties for all and equality before the law; but also states and parties that can mobilize and control people en masse. For there to be populist leaders, there has to be a people – a widespread belief that the social base of society has a collective will, not simply a variety of individual and group interests as in liberalism. Rousseau's idea of a general will is still relevant, the presupposition of many who have never heard of him. Today populist leaders couple the sacred names of 'nation' and 'people' and they are impatient of procedures that frustrate the alleged popular will. They want a direct relationship between 'the people' and government. What limits are there on the rule or will of the majority? Populist leaders rail against constitutional law. But a greater restraint on populism is still the tradition of political thinking and political practices: the view that societies are normally composed of differing interests and values which need distinguishing and compromising not aggregating.

Key words: populism; civic republicanism; citizenship; political equality

One of the most famous speeches ever made about democracy was that given in the public square in Athens 2,500 years ago by Pericles to his fellow citizens:

> Let me say that our system of government does not copy the institutions of our neighbours. It is more the case of our being a model to others, than of our imitating anyone else. Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority, but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability which the man possesses. No one, so long as he has it in him to be of service to the state, is kept in political obscurity because of poverty ...
>
> Here each individual is interested not only in his own affairs but in the affairs of the state as well: even those who are mostly occupied with their own business are extremely well informed on general politics – this is a peculiarity of ours: we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all. We Athenians, in our own persons, take our decisions on policy or submit them to proper discussions: for we do not think that there is an incompatibility between words and deeds; the worst thing is to rush into action before the consequences have been properly debated.

That is an immortal statement. But historians now tell us that Pericles was in fact a demagogue, flattering the people, telling them what they wanted to hear, but doing so

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above the heads of his fellow politicians and magistrates, asking them in effect to ignore the normal slow traditional – we would say constitutional – procedures of decision-making. He wanted them to trust him with power in their name for the period of a wartime crisis. In other words, he was not just a demagogue, he was a populist. He claimed to understand directly and to embody the will of the people. Perhaps he really believed that he was inspired by the popular will, or perhaps he was just damned clever and unscrupulous. Even with great men of our own time perfectly well known to us, it is sometimes difficult to tell which, especially though the filter of the media.

For there to be a populist leader, there has to be a people – a widespread belief that at the social base of society there is a collective will and not simply a variety of individuals, interests or fragmented indifference. This is what, in the eighteenth century, Jean Jacques Rousseau believed, and also those members of the Jacobin club who put his bust upon their table. In the modern world populist orators commonly couple the sacred names of 'nation' and 'people'. Populists are impatient of procedures. The one procedure today that populists favour and demand is referendum, even when there is no constitutional provision or established precedent for such. The president or prime minister may decide to broadcast directly to the nation to support his war aims; and this perhaps above the heads of the Congress or Parliament, or certainly before they have had time to consider or to ask for more information. Sometimes governments themselves initiate or promise referenda because of splits in their party, or to avoid parliamentary scrutiny, or to placate an aroused public opinion. Perhaps sometimes they have to do so in what they may think to be the national interest. Every different circumstance is debatable. But such acts are a kind of populism nonetheless. They exhibit what Pericles hypocritically called 'the worst thing', that is 'to rush into action before the consequences have been properly debated'.

Two Aspects of Populism

Some years ago the American sociologist Edward Shils suggested that populism has two aspects: the supremacy of the will of the people and its endeavour to create a direct relationship between people and government. Such an attempt usually blames intermediary institutions for frustrating the will of the people. At various times, and, in various places, these intermediary and divisive institutions have appeared as the landlords, the bankers, the bureaucrats, the priests, the elite, the immigrants and, most popular of all for populists to denounce, the politicians. Sometimes, of course, there are good reasons to denounce one or more of these entities. The populist style can sometimes restore or reinvigorate democratic processes. But when all intermediary institutions are denounced, especially the politicians, there are great dangers to liberty and democracy. Someone must say to the populist leader, 'By all means denounce particular politicians, but do not denounce or discredit the political process'. I see a fundamental contradiction between populism and politics. But before elaborating this point, we must understand in broad terms when populism can arise.

Sometimes spasmodically, sometimes for longer periods, large numbers of people possess an intense and shared feeling that their common interests are being ignored by rulers and politicians or addressed too slowly out of respect for traditional or complex legal procedures. Typically these intense feelings of common grievance have arisen among peasant populations (as in nineteenth-century South America and in Tsarist Russia, even in pre-modern China and Japan); but today newspaper editors as well as populist leaders can articulate, stir, sometimes create, but most certainly shape widespread anxieties over immigration, race relations, crime, poverty or simply taxation. Populists always simplify such issues, and usually have a single magic solution: 'expel the foreigners', 'give the banks to the nation', 'restore our lost national glory', and so on, and so on. Often a leader emerges from outside the traditional elites – like Jean-Marie Le Pen in contemporary France, or William Jennings Bryan or Huey Long in American politics of the last century – or sometimes a renegade breaks from the ruling class, as happened towards the end of the Roman Republic.

'The politics of the future', said Napoleon Bonaparte, 'will be the art of stirring the masses.' He himself did quite well at that at the time. For he was the first ruler able to trust the common people with guns, and could therefore for the first time institute universal rather than selective military conscription, the *levée en masse*. He could do so because he could still invoke – dictator and then Emperor though he became – the spirit of the French Revolution, and use and augment the intense and popular nationalism it had created. 'A patriot', Robespierre had said, 'supports the Republic en masse; he who fights about details is a traitor. Everything that is not respect for the people and you [the Jacobin Convention or Assembly] is a traitor.' The Jacobins claimed to embody the will of the people.

Again, for a populist to stir the masses, there have to be masses – both in social fact, to some degree, and certainly in popular psychology. There has to have been a centralization and standardization – in broad terms brought about nowadays by both industrialization and nationalism – in states of the size of France, Japan or the United Kingdom. Such states were once highly decentralized with strong regional or provincial popular cultures; even if there was a central state, it was far less powerful than in industrial or post-industrial societies. But what is wrong with populism? Is it not for some the very spirit of democracy: lack of deference and contempt for elites? The pre-modern world had believed universally that only the well educated should have an influence on affairs of state. Even John Stuart Mill in nineteenth-century England held that a democratic franchise must first involve compulsory secondary education. No philosopher before Rousseau had formulated any argument why all men (and soon even women), even if equal spiritually or in the eye of God, should have an equal voice in affairs of state. No religions had said anything about that.

For Rousseau, it is not our powers of reasoning or possession of educated knowledge that gives us civic equality; it is our uniqueness as individuals. No two natural species are more alike than one man is to another – the brotherhood of man; but each of us is also more distinct from another than any other animal is to one of its same species. And individuals were soon to be seen as unique and authentic personalities. But, of course, Rousseau famously avoided anarchism, or an uncontrolled individualism, advocating only the moral imperative that each man, however unique, must

will the best for all others. If we exercise our will in that manner, if we 'will' simply, innocently even, and discard elitist knowledge, superstition and tradition, we must in fact all agree. That is his theory of the 'General Will'. The true will of each is the will of all. Some such belief is the necessary basis for democracy, but it is not a sufficient basis for what most of us understand by democracy. We know all too well that the actual will of a majority can deprive both individuals and minority groups of freedom and what we have come to construct and conceive as human rights. Scholars have long realized that Rousseau's populist theory of the General Will has been a necessary condition for totalitarianism as well as for liberal democracy.

Beatrice Webb once said, socialist and Fabian though she was, 'Democracy is not the multiplication of ignorant opinions.' I quoted that recently on BBC television in a discussion on immigration. Speaking to the editor of a popular newspaper opposed to immigration, I reminded him that most people in opinion surveys believed the numbers of immigrants to be some three times greater than the actual numbers, and I asked him why he did not correct such fake beliefs among his readers. He replied that it was his duty as an editor to reflect – not to presume to correct – the well-known beliefs of his readers. That is when I quoted Beatrice Webb: 'Democracy is not the multiplication of ignorant opinions.' I got dozens of angry e-mails denouncing me as 'elitist', although almost an equal number praising me for courage. Not being a politician, it had not occurred to me that it was particularly courageous to draw a distinction between opinion and knowledge. Nor does it seem courageous to suggest that even 'democracy' needs some qualification or limitation, especially at a time when political leaders tend to speak in emotive 'sound bites' or slogans on a level seemingly set by the great dis-educator of our times (certainly in Britain and the United States), the populist tabloid press.

We need to stipulate some limitations on democracy if it is seen simply as majority opinion. Morality is, I suppose, the most general such limitation; laws of general applicability figure too (so long as they are reasonably just); and there is now almost a craze for the idea of human rights. Let me never be heard to mock the idea of human rights, yet I agree with the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume that all ideas of rights – whether called natural, human or civil – are human achievements and artefacts and are not natural endowments. I simply want to draw a distinction between human rights that lay upon each of us the responsibility, obligation even, to respect the rights and needs of others, and that modern idea of individual rights which can actually work against social responsibility. Some modern formulations of rights can lead to both former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's 'there is no such thing as society' and to the current outbreak of litigiousness, once called Californian but now spreading rapidly among us British. If you follow much of the media regularly, you will soon learn that there is no such thing as an accident, a natural disaster or a risk reasonably taken: someone must be held responsible; the optimistic belief is even propagated that all death must somehow be put at the doctors' door. I want to argue that there is a concept of citizenship, called 'civic republicanism' by scholars, that should mediate both common views of the primacy of democracy and even some liberal views of the primacy of individual rights. Rights imply civic duties and duties imply civil rights.

Politics Itself

Now if Rousseau was right to search for some justification for everyone to be a citizen regardless of rank or education, yet he was wrong to suggest in his theory of the General Will that all intermediary groups and institutions between the individual and 'the Legislator' (his selfless and benign state) are divisive of the general interest.

Alexis de Tocqueville, without mentioning Rousseau, in fact answers him in his great two volume work *Democracy in America* (1835; 1840). The famous chapter entitled 'The Danger of the Tyranny of the Majority' is immediately followed by 'The Causes that Mitigate the Tyranny of the Majority'. These mitigations were the dispersal of central power to the States, the importance of local government and democracy, and, more fundamentally, the presence of intermediary institutions of commerce, of culture, of voluntary bodies, of different churches, and what we would now call pressure groups or interest groups, all standing between the individual and the state. These are essential for freedom and provide the cornerstones of the school of active citizenship.

Now in the Western tradition of political thinking, there is a formidable alternative tradition to populism, and it turns upon the very concept or process that populist leaders so often denounce – politics itself. How do we civilize ourselves? Aristotle said that we must enter into the *polis* as citizens, enter into political relationships with other citizens. By politics and citizenship I mean what I take Aristotle to have meant. Politics is an activity among inhabitants living as citizens in a state or *polis*, which through public debate decides how they govern themselves.[2] But political rule was not necessarily, at any given time, democratic. A *polis* should have a democratic element in it, but Aristotle advocated mixed-government: the wise and the able rotating and governing in turn with the consent of the many (to him, that many – whom Romans called *populus* – excluded slaves, foreigners and, of course, women, all of whom were to enter the polity much later; but this, I think, is as an extension, not a refutation of his thinking).

A pure democracy, Aristotle said, would embody the fallacy that because men are equal in some things, they are equal in all. However, the special sense of *polis* or civic state was to him a conditional teleological idea: both a standard and a goal to which all states would naturally move if not impeded – as well they might be impeded, by folly, unrestrained greed and power-hunger by leaders lacking civic sense, or by conquest. Aristotle brings out the intense specificity of the political relationship (and soon I will say its inherent secularity) when, in the second book of *The Politics*, he examines and criticizes schemes for ideal states. He says that his teacher Plato in *The Republic*, made the mistake of trying to reduce everything within the polis to an ideal unity. Rather it is the case that:

> there is a point at which a polis, by advancing in unity, will cease to be a polis; there is another point, short of that, at which it may still remain a polis, but will nonetheless come near to losing its essence, and will thus be a worse polis. It is as if you were to turn harmony into mere unison, or to reduce a theme to a single beat. The truth is that the polis is an aggregate of many members.[3]

Politics then, according to Aristotle, arises in organized societies that recognize themselves to be an aggregation of many members, not a single tribe, religion, interest or

even tradition. That is why in my book *In Defence of Politics*, first published in 1962, I defined politics as the activity by which the differing interests and values that exist in any complex society are conciliated. There is no necessary General Will (except to decide issues politically), nor do we need to invent one. Thus politics arises out of a perception of differences as natural. This perception has both an empirical and an ethical element. The empirical element is the generalization that all advanced, complex or even just large societies contain a diversity of interests – whether moral, social or economic, and in fact usually a complex blending of each, hard to disentangle. The ethical component, whatever its precise nature, always sets limits beyond which a government should not go in attempting to enforce consensus or unity. Perhaps no general limits can be demonstrated. They may all be specific to time and place – here the relativist is half right. But the relativist is also half wrong because the principle of limitations is general and the empirical distinction is usually clear, allowing for deceit, rhetoric and muddle between constitutional regimes that strive to limit power and thus to govern politically, and those regimes whose rulers strive after total or at least unchallengeable power. That my definition of politics, or rather Aristotle's, is not an empty truism, can be seen at once if one remarks sadly that most regimes even in the modern world are not political: they hunt down or suppress politics rather than encouraging it as a civic cult. And even the most dictatorial and oppressive regimes – say North Korea – claim to be doing it in the name of 'the people'. If they act politically at all, then it is only between these four palace walls or else when facing a superior rival power. They allow no public politics – the Roman *res-publica*.

Aristotle certainly held that to be himself at his best a man must be a citizen. But he did not believe that was all a man should do: he could be a philosopher or a merchant – why not? Nor did he hold that to be an active citizen ensured that one would act rightly, act ethically. To be an active citizen was a necessary condition for the good life, but not a sufficient one.

Democracy Not By Itself

In a modern democracy the politician must, of course, always be aware of the dangers of trying to ignore strong public opinion. But he must also be aware of the dangers of simply trying to flatter and follow it if he thinks public opinion at a given moment is acting against its own longer term best interests. He must have the courage to stand up and argue back when the public is being urged by populist leaders (whether politicians, preachers or press lords) to break laws or conventions democratically legitimated and designed to mediate compromises between the different interests and values that are characteristic of a modern state and a complex society. Pericles had said in his praise of democracy, 'the secret of liberty is courage'.

To recall another bold saying, Oliver Wendell Holmes, a famous United States Justice of the Supreme Court, once said ironically, 'Democracy is what the crowd wants.' He was defending his view of constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech against some repressive but popular anti-socialist legislation by a state legislature. Well, sometimes democracy is 'what the crowd wants', but sometimes not. On

the one hand, populism can arise from the failure of intermediate institutions to consider ordinary opinion, when a political class, one party or a president or prime minister appears to treat the bureaucracy and local government as their own property, rather than as a public trust. Perhaps populism even can be stirred – even should be stirred – when a purely pragmatic, purely compromising practice of politics lacks any sense of vision or moral purpose. As Margaret Canovan has written, '[when] too great a gap opens between hallowed democracy and the grubby business of politics, populists tend to move onto the vacant territory, promising instead of the dirty world of party manoeuvring the shiny ideal of democracy renewed'.[4]

Somewhat similarly, Jack Hayward has seen the recent rise of populist politics in many countries of the European Union as a response to 'the democratic deficit' and remote elitism, even corruption, at high levels.[5] It is this very gap between doctrine and practice that makes me so positively concerned, not just with a revival of serious political thinking (which unhappily rarely penetrates beyond the academy nowadays) but with a new type of citizenship education in schools that can discuss real issues, concentrate on problem-solving, and learn participative skills as well as realistic knowledge about how the political system works. (A new subject in the English national curriculum attempts all this in the name of 'the active citizen', not just 'the good citizen').[6] Over time, this could help people become more knowledgeable and more realistic about political and economic possibilities, and encourage political leaders to engage with the voters through more rational persuasion and less populist sound bites and dumbing-down of issues.

So I conclude that there is a basic tension between the political or Aristotelian way of looking at the world – whereby politics only arises because of differing interests and values that we must endure, harmonize or compromise creatively and educatively – and a Rousseau-like way which always looks for a united general will or popular sovereignty. But in modern democracies, the sociologist Peter Worsley was perhaps right to suggest that we should regard populism, not as something wholly distinct, but as 'an emphasis, a dimension of political culture in general, not simply a particular kind of overall ideological system or type of organisation'.[7] He might better have said 'movement' rather than 'organisation'; but the point still stands. And if we think of Abraham Lincoln, Georges Clemenceau, Lloyd George, Winston Churchill or Nelson Mandela, we have examples of statesmen who were able to challenge public opinion and opposition successfully - sometimes even within their own party - precisely because they had 'the common touch'. They had at least as many of the techniques of a populist leader as are needed to achieve great political compromises. But it is surely more common for populist leaders to be opportunistic and exploitative of grievances and prejudices.

Populism is indeed a spectre haunting democracy from which it is hard, perhaps impossible, to escape entirely in modern conditions of a consumption-driven society and a populist free press. Democracy itself, as Tocqueville realised, can have two aspects: individual liberties for all and equality before the law but also the ability of the state to mobilize and control the people en masse.[8] But populism needs to be, and can be, kept in check by leaders earning public respect for the political processes of compromise by being willing and able to explain and justify them publicly,

in reasonable and reasoning terms, and not, as so often, by practicing a glib, cynical and usually quite transparent populism. Refusal to state publicly hard but necessary truths can, whether through folly, deceit, cowardice or neglect, exacerbate the contempt in which populist leaders so often hold not just particular politicians, but the political process itself. Rival political leaders who when faced with popular concerns, whether (for example) the reasons for going to war or the options in pensions policy always have a glib rhetorical answer of the 'we-were-right-all-along-so-trust-us-now' kind, never admitting reasonable doubt or that solutions to most problems are problematic. They should not be surprised that the electorate distrust them. Then their own smart populism – having debased the level of public debate and thus popular understanding of the complexities of government and policy – is perpetually threatened by being outbid in plausible simplicities by new populist leaders from outside the traditional political classes.

NOTES

1. R.V. Rieu, (ed.), *Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (London: Penguin, 1954), pp.117–19.
2. Bernard Crick, *In Defence of Politics*, 5th ed. (London: Continuum, 2000), first published in 1962. The last edition admits that the first edition can now appear overly optimistic in only considering politics within states rather than among states.
3. *The Politics of Aristotle*, trans. and intro. Ernest Barker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), p.51.
4. Margaret Canovan, 'Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy', *Political Studies*, Vol.47, No.1 (1999), pp.2–16. Canovan has been a notable commentator on Hannah Arendt.
5. Jack Hayward, 'The Populist Challenge to Elitist Democracy in Europe', in J. Hayward (ed.), *Eliticism, Populism and European Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).
6. Bernard Crick, *Essays on Citizenship* (London: Continuum, 2001) and the report of an advisory group I chaired: *Education for Democracy and Citizenship in Schools* (London: Department of Education, 1998).
7. Peter Worsley, 'The Concept of Populism', in G. Ionescu and E. Gellner (eds), *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1969), p.245. Ionescu and Gellner's book is still one of the best modern accounts.
8. See Bernard Crick, *Democracy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Margaret Canovan (note 4) ends her fine article on populism by pointing to 'the inescapable ambiguity of democracy' (p.15). See also her *Populism* (London: Junction Books, 1981). But Benjamin Arditi, 'Populism as a Spectre of Democracy: a Response to Canovan', *Political Studies*, Vol.52, No.1 (2004), pp.135–43, offers 'a friendly interrogation' that (following a distinction of Michael Oakeshott's) puts more stress on the politics of faith than on the politics of scepticism.

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