Populism, protest and the people

Patrick Riordan SJ

News reports on current affairs, whether it be national elections or violence on the streets of our cities, frequently mention 'populism' as being relevant to understanding what is happening. What is meant by the term? Political philosopher, Patrick Riordan SJ distils a selection of recent academic writing on the topic in order to help us answer that question.

It is not unusual nowadays to find that populism is blamed for a deterioration in the quality of political argument and the growing violence of social conflict. Respect for opponents and respect for the truth are missing from debate. This overall negative evaluation is reflected in the title of a three-volume work with the overall title, *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy*.[1] Volume 1 explores the definition of populism, volume 2 is concerned with social movements and extremism, and volume 3 collects papers on migration, gender and religion. The title reflects a widespread view that the rise of populism poses a threat to democracy, and the wide range of literature represented and discussed in the three volumes lends support to that opinion. However, it is not universally held, and there are strong voices claiming that populism should also be understood as a development from within democracy, not only as a threat from outside democratic principles.

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Nadia Urbinati, professor of political science at Columbia University, argues strongly against the 'crisis' interpretation.[2] Kurt Weyland also rejects the alarmist approach to populism, and makes the case that the institutions of liberal democracy are resilient enough to resist the encroaches of populism.[3] I will return to reviewing their analyses, but first it is helpful to list the phenomena usually associated with populism, about which most theorists agree.

What is populism?

The literature on populism is vast, and the variety and complexity of examples discussed under this heading suggest that a single, essentialist definition of populism is impossible. However, commentators list a number of features that will occur in various combinations, permitting a disciplined application of the label 'populist' without in any particular case having to claim that all features are present.[4] For example, there is a dispute about the extent to which a populist leader must always be a feature, some pointing to the phenomena of protest movements such as 'Occupy Wall Street' that are explicitly leaderless and refuse to institutionalise.

Nadia Urbinati offers a triangular model: (a) a populist leader; (b) the people; (c) the establishment. There is much to be said about each of these elements. The leader is spokesperson for the people, delivering them from oppression by the establishment. Urbinati acknowledges that populist protest movements don't always have a leader; however, when they develop beyond protest and try to achieve and use state power, they will require a figurehead who acts as spokesperson.

The people is not identical with the 'sovereign people', that abstract figure important in any account of popular sovereignty. Nor is the people the totality of the population or inhabitants of some territory. The people, for the populist, is that disaffected mass of those who see themselves as victims, who have been denied their say, who have experienced exclusion from the benefits of globalisation, who have failed to see the equality and prosperity promised to them in the electoral manifestos of various parties.

Their oppressor is variously identified as the establishment, the system, the political class, or the elite, who have monopolised power in the operations of government, and so have deprived the ordinary good people of their rights, their rightful share in prosperity and their access to power. Even political parties in opposition can be represented as belonging to the establishment. The movement, and in particular the leader, lends their voice and gives expression to the frustration and anger of the people. Agitation on behalf of the neglected may remain on the level of a popular movement of protest, or it may include the project of achieving political power in the state.

Brubaker's listing of elements adds emphasis to aspects of this basic model. The grounds given for the alleged dissatisfaction can be concessions made to minorities, to multiculturalism, to globalisation, or to migrants. Insistence on immediacy in providing remedies reflects a distrust of government institutions. At the same time, anti-intellectualism in populism is expressed in a valuing of common sense and suspicion of technical language as an attempt to fool ordinary people. Populists' objections to the constraints of civility and political correctness in public debate reflect this suspicion.

Is populism a threat to democracy?

Urbinati argues that populism can be understood from the perspective of the changing nature of representative democracy. While many interpret populism as expressing a preference for direct instead of representative democracy, shown for instance in favouring referenda, Urbinati reads it as a developing form of representative democracy. She borrows the term 'audience democracy' from Bernard Manin, to describe how the electorate becomes an audience for the performance of a leader whose principal role is to express the interests of the people that are threatened by the system, or by an elite, or by oligarchy. The leader assures their supporters that they themselves will not become part of an oppressive elite, but will continue to safeguard the people from oppression by those powers that threaten them. This form of 'audience democracy' is then 'direct representative democracy', with the populist leader promising direct access through him- or herself to political power.

In giving voice to supposed frustrations, the leader in a sense constructs 'the people'. Those who respond to the leader offer their loyalty and support to the champion who takes on their cause. In populist rhetoric, 'the people' is identified with just one part of the population, assumed to be the many 'good, ordinary, hard-working' people. The establishment, or the elite, or the experts, or the system, threaten the interests of the 'good people'. This they do by relying on the institutions of law, and the regulations of the system, so that they can justify what they do and don't do by appeal to objective and impartial structures. Those institutional structures are made to appear to be the obstacle to the people exercising their proper power. Subverting the democratic principle of

majority rule, the populist leader proceeds to identify the majority with that population that feels itself denied its interests, and in speaking up for this people, the populist invokes the principle of majority rule. The notion of majority is thereby changed, since it does not assume that, from time to time, the composition of the majority will differ, depending on how the constituents combine. For the populist the majority is unchanging, being that 'many' who are likely to be oppressed by the 'few'.

Urbinati reminds us that the motivating concerns driving populism can be genuinely democratic, their validity arising from the real feeling of exclusion experienced by citizens. Populism arises because of disappointment and frustration with the failure of party democracy to deliver on promises to ensure the equality of all citizens, to meet the needs and interests of voters, and to limit the power of government. In the UK many were persuaded to vote for Brexit with a promise of deliverance from the oppression of Brussels bureaucrats. Have those voters reasons now to feel betrayed by those who promised so much?

Viewed positively, populism appears from within democracy addressing an experienced deficit. It offers a form of representation that is direct rather than indirect, because it does not rely on the mediation of institutions such as political party or communications media, whether print or broadcast. Communication between leader and followers is direct, greatly facilitated by social media and by the internet. Populist leaders make great efforts to maintain the impression that they communicate directly with their supporters, who in turn are led to believe that they have the ear of the leader. How forms of democracy will evolve to accommodate this relatively new phenomenon remains to be seen.

Is talk of a crisis alarmist?

Weyland offers a similar definition of populism to that advanced by Urbinati. In his discussion there is a similar focus on 'charismatic leadership', the idea that 'the people' is formed by the leader's discourse out of 'a heterogeneous, amorphous, and largely unorganized mass of followers', and that the communication between the leader and their followers 'is sustained by direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized connections'.[5]

Challenging many other authors who see populism principally in terms of the threat it poses to democracy and to pluralist liberal regimes, Weyland denies that it thereby constitutes a crisis of democracy, although he does not deny the risks or the dangers posed by populist leaders who manage to mobilise significant masses of supporters.

His book is an historical survey of both right-wing and left-wing attempts to gain and, when successful, to use political power. He argues that the circumstances in which populists succeed are very rare occurrences, and the institutional safeguards built into liberal democratic regimes have proven resilient to populist challenges. Two conditions have to be fulfilled for a populist leader to succeed in implementing constitutional and structural reforms once power has been attained: conjunctural opportunity and institutional weakness. Conjunctural opportunity refers to a fortuitous set of events that provides the leader with an occasion to succeed and gain popularity. This might be the opportunity created by unexpected windfall resources, *e.g.,* price rises in oil or gas or other natural resources significant for the economy, that enable the leader to distribute benefits of various kinds to the electorate. The chance events may

be negative in nature, as when a major crisis must be addressed (*e.g.*, hyperinflation, Covid-19) and the leader averts disaster by bold, decisive action. Such conjunctural opportunities must be exploited in a timely way by the populist leader in a direct demand that the people show their support and confer power to act.

Based on his investigation of forty cases of both right- and left-wing populist struggles for power, Weyland concludes that only seven out of the forty replaced democracy with authoritarian rule.[6] In Latin America, neoliberal or right-wing cases include Peru under Alberto Fujimori and El Salvador under Nayib Bukele; left-wing cases being Venezuela under Hugo Chávez, Bolivia under Evo Morales and Ecuador under Rafael Correa. In Europe there are only right-wing instances: Hungary under Victor Orbán and Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Weyland draws the reassuring conclusion that Western democracies can rely 'on a great deal of institutional strength, anchored in firm, widely accepted constitutions that are not easy to change'.[7] The strength of their institutions has meant that populist leaders who achieved power, such as Boris Johnson in the UK and Donald Trump in the USA, did no serious damage to democratic institutions. Weyland devotes a whole chapter to discussing Trump as a populist leader who encountered resilient institutions that limited what he could do, even as President of the USA.[8]

The extent of the threat posed by populism depends on the relative weakness of the democratic and governmental institutions in place. While those institutions have proved resilient in many cases where populists have attained power, the study highlights the need to maintain the relevant institutions whose purpose is to facilitate and preserve well-functioning democratic systems. This is one important learning point from his study of populist movements.

Conclusion

Our authors warn against alarmism, but do not deny the dangers of populism. The resilience of democratic institutions may offer assurance about the maintenance of democratic government, but many other public goods may be harmed by populist movements and populist rhetoric. Especially when combined with nationalism, racism, zenophobia or criminality, populist protest can become violent, and damage community cohesion and public order. As we have seen, lives, property, civil peace and the ordinary exercise of liberties are taken from people. In such cases, Urbinati's argument for understanding a new form of direct representational democracy is not relevant, and the supposed democratic deficit cannot justify violence or the harms done. Weyland's encouragement to strengthen and support the established institutions on which democracy relies might renew our commitment to managing social conflict without recourse to violence and to fostering respect for the rule of law. This is what Catholic Social Teaching would ask of us, as exemplified in the Second Vatican Council's teaching on the common good and public order, *Gaudium et spes*, especially paragraphs 73-76.

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[1] Gregor Fitzi, Juergen Mackert & Bryan Turner (eds.), *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2018).

[2] Nadia Urbinati, *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), especially pp. 195-97.

[3] Kurt Weyland, *Democracy's Resilience to Populism's Threat: Countering Global Alarmism* (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

[4] Rogers Brubaker, 'Why Populism?' in *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy. Vol I: Theory and Concepts.*

[5] Weyland, *Democracy's Resilience to Populism's Threat*, p. 4.

[6] Weyland, *Democracy's Resilience to Populism's Threat*, p. 66.

[7] Weyland, *Democracy's Resilience to Populism's Threat*, p. 67.

[8] Weyland, *Democracy's Resilience to Populism's Threat*, pp. 196-226.