SYMPOSIUM: POPULISMS IN THE WORLD-SYSTEM

Rip It Up and Start Again:
The Challenge of Populism in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract

This essay examines contemporary populist movements along an axis rarely explored in world-systems analysis: as either libertarian or authoritarian social movements. Rather than representing a fundamental break with traditional notions of left and right-wing politics, this article argues that these populist movements are a re-imagining of older political debates, which framed the conflict between the Enlightenment and its opponents—in short, between the search for a universal and just social order—as opposed to a defense of forms of cultural nationalism.

Keywords: Enlightenment principles, Cultural nationalism, Universalism

The resurgence of populist social movements around the world-system has been interpreted in a number of ways. For some it is a reassertion of the rights of sovereignty for political communities seeking to defend the nation-state from globalization, while others see it as reflecting a breakdown in the existing political order and a challenge to liberal democracy. There is an extensive debate

on the political left regarding the extent to which populism can ever be a force for progressive social change (Fassin 2018; Gerbaudo 2017; Mouffe 2017).

What is clear, however, is that there is little consensus as to the meaning of populism, other than broad brush strokes and the idea that populism means *the people* (Muller 2017). It is hard to imagine a populism that did not, in some sense, appeal to the people. The questions here are: which people, and how is this to be determined?

The grounds on which appeals to the people are made vary, from ethnic nationalism to support for universal human rights. Critics have often viewed populism as an expression of the irrational in politics, perhaps of an unruly mass threatening civilisation through aggressive and undemocratic actions. Anne Applebaum (2001) made this point about the Seattle World Trade Organisation protests in 1999 when she asked, "who elected the anti-capitalist convergence?" A number of factors tend to recur when definitions of populism are put forward and they can be succinctly dealt with here:

- Populism is the people, usually juxtaposed with the elites. The latter are viewed as being corrupt, Machiavellian, amoral and out of touch with the people (Stanley 2008).
- Populism is lacking in reason or prone to irrational demands; populist movements fail to understand the nature of political compromise and lack the maturity of conventional political parties and processes as is needed for liberal democratic electoral politics to function (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2007).
- Populism is often associated with demagogic or charismatic individuals and leaders who have an unnerving capacity to rouse emotions and mobilise anger (Korkut 2007; Mudde 2016).
- In the current era, populism is closely linked with illiberalism, by which is meant a fundamental challenge to important liberal principles, such as the rule of law, individual liberty, human rights and meaningful democratic elections (Abts and Rummens 2007; Korkut 2007).
- Populism in its extreme form threatens liberal democracy in the name of a utopian vision (Muller 2017; Fassin 2018).
- For many critics, populism is often associated with a conspiratorial view of politics, which might manifest itself in critiques of the mass media as being a tool of powerful interests or of conspiracies organized by elites.

While populist movements are also social movements that seek to mobilise the people, it is less clear-cut that all social movements are populist. As Roberts (2015) and others have noted, the relationship between the two concepts has tended to be under-examined in academic literature, but it is an important one.

In the context of the evolution of the modern world-system (MWS), a key issue to consider is the extent to which populist movements can be viewed as being anti-systemic. If we accept that anti-systemic movements can be progressive *or* reactionary in their goals and outlooks, then the label anti-systemic is appropriate. By progressive I mean that the goals are broadly ones that promote universality in the form of a general improvement in the quality of people's lives. A good example of this can be found in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals agreed upon in 2015.[1] Progressivism has its intellectual antecedents in the legacy of Enlightenment thought. By reactionary I mean the tradition that emerged as the Anti-Enlightenment, which sought to promote the ideas of separation, particularism and ultimately ethno-nationalism as the basis for a social order and a political system (Sternhell 2010). Both kinds of populist social movement can be seen as being anti-systemic in ways that might transform the world-system.

Populism in the Modern World-System

By the end of the 1980s a decisive shift in the balance of power in the MWS occurred with the collapse of the Soviet system and the formal end of the Cold War. Structurally the Cold War had locked in place a geo-political order with two "spheres of influence" (generally seen as East-West, but in world-system terms more usefully viewed as a conflict between the core and parts of the semi-periphery), enabling governing client regimes to use various forms of coercion, bribery, co-optation, intimidation and violence to quell nascent protest movements and maintain civil order as best as possible (Halliday 1983).

The end of the Cold War also brought with it an opening in terms of political space, which enabled pronounced shifts in the nature of the political order across many parts of the semi-periphery. The spread of often very fragile forms of democracy, from South Korea through to Brazil, meant that previous forms of state violence against social protest became more problematic, though not impossible.[2] Crucially it needs to be borne in mind that democracy in the semi-periphery has been built on the foundations of highly authoritarian systems. Many of the actors and institutions that underpinned authoritarianism have either endured directly or partially into the democratic period with significant consequences for progressive governments that have taken office. Recent and ongoing attacks on the Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff and former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva by judges allied to the political right illustrate this clearly; so, too, does the experience of populist movements in Armenia, where a popular uprising successfully overthrew the illiberal democratic regime of Serzh Sargsyan only to find that the dominant

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[1] See *United Nations Sustainable Development Goals*: https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/.

[2] Witness the revival of U.S.-backed death squads in El Salvador and Russian violence in the Ukraine. Equally the end of the Cold War has also ushered in a new era of global violence and warfare with the core being the main driver of this, sanctioning wars that stretch from Europe to Africa and the Middle East with colossal death tolls.

institutions that remained were largely unchanged and staffed by supporters of the previous regime, with whom the new pro-democracy government had to work (Nacla 2018; Liakhov 2018).

Thus, the end of the Cold War ushered in an era shaped by two major elite discourses whose ideas resonate in the current period of populism: the end of history and the triumph of liberal capitalist democracy; but also its dystopian counterpart, the clash of civilizations, according to which quasi-apocalyptic view the end of the Cold War ushered in a new age of global conflict between cultures rather than over economic or ideological interests.

The end of history and the post-Cold War extension and deepening of capitalism are central to understanding the rise of contemporary populist movements. As Immanuel Wallerstein (2009) has noted, the triumph of the market has posed a number of apparently irresolvable problems for political elites, who have become increasingly vulnerable to the demands of capital for profit, and the conflicting demands of the general population for higher wages, public services, and welfare. Hence the concept of the 1% versus the 99%, which emerged during the Occupy movement, was an expression of the polarizing nature of post-Cold War capitalism and the sharp increase in global inequality that has occurred (Van Gelder 2011). Interestingly both progressive and reactionary populist social movements share this critique of capitalism and globalization while diverging sharply on the correct response to it.

The end of the Cold War was also seen by many as the historic demise of the left, with the collapse of communism or the transformation of social democratic parties into various shades of neoliberalism. This latter trend is a marked pattern across the MWS and has seen social democratic parties retreat from their historic constituencies into a more open embrace of capitalism as they search for legitimacy among capitalists and the financial markets. Nonetheless, a number of factors recur here in explaining the rise of populist social movements: growing inequality and the increasing precarity of working lives; the growing indebtedness of the world's population, particularly the young and university graduates; and the fear that democratic politics, having become detached from the electorate, are now the preserve of unaccountable elites (Munck 2013; Mason 2012; Graeber 2012).

At the same time, the clash of civilizations discourse has also manifested itself in the emergence of reactionary populist social movements that are rooted in a separatist ethnic nationalism and have an essentialist orientation towards social identity (Rydgren 2007). The logical consequence of this is to further embed discrimination and racism into mainstream political discourses and policies. These themes manifest themselves in specific kinds of populist social movements that can be seen across the MWS, and importantly, in major political parties and governments that have become increasingly powerful and popular in multiple countries (Lochocki 2018). Many of these groups are reacting with hostility towards globalization and cosmopolitanism, which they believe will lead to the erosion of traditional social values, and

transfer sovereignty from the people to technocratic elites (Edwards 2010; Korkut 2012; Mudde 2016).

The recent installation of Carlo Cottarelli as the Italian Prime Minister is a case in point; here, a former IMF official is chosen as Prime Minister of a country which had voted for a political program critical of the European Union (EU). For populist movements this is an illustration of the way in which political and economic decisions are taken without regard for the wishes of the people. For reactionary populists, it is a reflection of the cosmopolitan and liberal elite's subversion of the nation in defense of globalization; for progressive populists, it is a move that defends the EU from the people, but the EU in this case is viewed as a project to deepen and defend capitalism across members states and promote austerity measures at the expense of public services (Osborne 2018).

The appeal of ethnic nationalist populism is in part then its defense of sovereignty and the people against a number of "external' threats."[3] This defensive posture towards outsiders simultaneously generates an inclusive, positive form of identity politics for those deemed to "belong" due to their ethnic characteristics, however defined (Mestrovic 2004). More pointedly, in Central and Eastern Europe this kind of populism has draped itself in socialist clothing by claiming to stand up for welfare, properly paid jobs, support for the elderly, and so on (Enyedi 2016). These reactionary populist movements, despite their social messages, are rooted in the preservation of traditional forms of hierarchy and social order, which are seen as being threatened by the spread of a global and cosmopolitan capitalism. This does not make these groups anti-capitalist; instead they more often represent a return to the kind of national capitalist strategy of the inter-war period: a strong state to protect the national market and segments of the population under an authoritarian social order.

There have also been very different kinds of populist movements emerging in the post-Cold War period that have embraced cosmopolitan outlooks and defended universality as the basis for a good society; among the universal values they embrace are liberty, solidarity, equality and democracy. Thus, from the Zapatista uprising in 1994 through to Occupy in 2011, progressive populism has articulated a critique of the inequalities that characterize the MWS, and they have done so in rhetorically powerful ways (e.g. the 99% vs. the 1%) (Nail 2013). However, thus far at least, these movements have not been able to build a lasting and sustained organization that could generate enduring social change. For the reactionary right-wing populist movements the goals are easier: to assume state power and use this authority to reshape social life in ways that reinforce traditional hierarchies and social divisions. For progressive social movements, the goals are more complex and therefore more difficult to attain. If the state is viewed as being a problem because of

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[3] Take, for example, the UK's *Britain First* party.

its violence, coercion, protection of privilege and inequality, is the goal to take over the state, or is it something else? For reactionary populist movements, the key to mobilization of the people is to combine tactics like stoking fear of foreigners with an appeal to national identity, wrapped in an often irrational and intolerant nationalism. By contrast, progressive populism has to appeal to reason as a basis for mobilizing people around a defense of Enlightenment ideals of equality, liberty and solidarity.

Conclusions: Principles and Pitfalls

Populism, of course, is not new; it has a lengthy lineage in the MWS. The argument made here is that the contemporary division between types of populist movements can be traced back to the Enlightenment and is a manifestation of a very old conflict between universalism and nationalism. The basis for a progressive social order cannot be built on national identity, because, ultimately, what Mestrovic (2004) distinguishes as good (civic) nationalism invariably bleeds into bad (ethnic) nationalism. To be clear, the road to the Holocaust was built by nationalist ideologies of the Anti-Enlightenment, not the Enlightenment itself. The road to the gulag, too, was built on the basis of Stalin's nationalist chauvinism and authoritarian bolshevism, not on the Enlightenment ideals of preserving individual liberty (Sternhell 2010; Vujacic 2007). Indeed, one of the major failings of Marxism as political practice has been precisely its willingness to sacrifice the individual on the basis of an appeal to the objective interests of the working classes. By contrast, the progressive populist movements that have emerged in this period have shown a sensitivity to multiple forms of oppression and illegitimate authority, which they continue to struggle to overturn. They have also, in many instances, shown a resistance to the Marxist legacy of vanguardism and doctrinal purity, which, over the course of the Twentieth Century left a legacy of authoritarianism that seriously undermined the case for socialism amongst the uncommitted (Tufekci 2014).

Today's progressive populist movements pose a number of opportunities as well as challenges. Below I enumerate a set of principles to orient such movements, and a list of potential pitfalls to be avoided:

Principles

1. Defend Reason, Universality and Progress

There is a clear need to defend reason and universality in the face of social and political movements whose goals are based on cultural nationalism. The attacks on reason and universality have been disastrous for progressive movements, whether it be articulated by the anti-Enlightenment of nationalist movements and their ideologues, or the Nietzschean legacy of postmodern and poststructuralist theory (Ferry and Renault 1990; Sternhell 2010). The retreat from reason by progressive social and political thought has enabled neoliberal elites to claim this mantle in the post-Cold War era—hence Barak Obama's recent reflection on the election of President Trump:

"What if we were wrong? … Maybe people just want to fall back into their tribe? Sometimes I wonder if I was ten or twenty years too early" (Baker 2018). Thus, for Obama, the populist movements in the United States that supported Trump are a reflection of the lack of cosmopolitanism of "the people"—they are tribal, with all that the idea implies. In the same way, former U.S. Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, has recently revived the totalitarianism thesis to depict a future in which fascism is the main threat to humanity, whether from the left or right (Albright 2018).

Rhetorically such claims suggest that the neoliberal mainstream is the last bastion of reason and liberal values, a wall against a tide of populist extremism. In fact, Dan Hind (2017) has persuasively argued that the threat to reason comes not just from populism but *overwhelmingly* from mainstream corporate and state actors, who have increasingly shielded themselves from public accountability and undermined a critical and independent public realm. The success or failure of progressive populism will be shaped in part by its ability to reclaim the mantle of reason in defense of universal goals, of which liberty and equality are central, and to successfully build upon and disseminate these ideas.[4]

2. *The State and Politics*

Twenty-First Century progressive populist movements, as part of the World Social Forum (WSF), have largely eschewed the kind of authoritarianism associated with Marxist socialism in the Twentieth Century, as can be seen in its charter of principles (Patomäki and Teivainen 2004; Becker 2007). This has meant a critique of the state and liberal democratic politics in favour of extra parliamentary political activity. The preference for autonomy, community and workplace self-determination, and anti-statism is understandable and in many respects laudable.[5] However, the libertarianism of many of these movements also has to face the fact that the state form is, for many people in the MWS, the only defense available from a completely predatory form of capitalism. Thus, the concept of public service needs to be defended and modified by progressive populism in the long-term, transformed in the direction of the goals that these movements seek, including the extension of democracy in the workplace and community, and mutual aid (Conway 2012). In the short-term, there must also be a defense of the welfare provision that states provide and without which life is impossible for millions of people. It is hard to imagine reaching the goal of extending community and workplace democracy without building upon and adapting existing

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[4] The Enlightenment defended the values of liberty *and* equality as the basis of a good society. Anti-Enlightenment intellectuals from Edmund Burke to Isaiah Berlin have tried to separate the two concepts and argue that they are incompatible, in effect sacrificing equality for liberty in defense of privilege. But as Sternhell (2007) notes, the two themes were central to Enlightenment thought and certainly to its greatest figure, Rousseau.

[5] See Raul Zibechi's (2010) excellent work on community self-organizing in South America, for example.

forms of public service. This involves, out of necessity, the messy business of mobilizing, organizing and pressing political parties to defend public services and to push for wider goals.

Pitfalls

The pitfalls facing progressive populist movements are quite apparent, too:

1.   Unity

There is an understandable lack of unity around the goals to be strived for, though the WSF has produced much literature on this issue (Becker 2007). The intense distrust of political parties and co-optation should not be at the expense of the need for organization and the bringing to bear of pressure on the political process.[6] The state is minimally accountable to the people in a way in which corporations certainly are not.

2.   Organization and Mobilization

There is also a need for organization and mobilization around issues that will bring people together in defense of the services that they need for a better quality of life for all. Progressive populist movements that seek to extend democratic control over work, the economy and community organization have a huge part to play in determining the success or failure of meeting these challenges. Achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals would be an important benchmark here to measure progress towards profound social change.

3.   Democracy and Demagoguery

There is an obvious need to resist the rise of charismatic leaders who appeal to emotion rather than reason, be they progressive or reactionary. The defense of democracy and self-determination depends upon this, and it is one of the gravest dangers facing progressive populism. For reactionary populism, the appeal to the strong leader (almost invariably a man) comes naturally and is consistent with the authoritarian and hierarchical values these movements tend to promote.

One of the virtues of world-systems analysis has been its rejection of teleology—there is no necessary direction to history, as found in the work of Marxists and neoliberals alike. Thus, the transformation of the MWS could lead to something far worse than that which has existed hitherto. To be anti-systemic, as noted, does not *necessarily* mean to be progressive. It means to build a new world-system, which enshrines different kinds of principles, and if that is to be the outcome of the spread of reactionary populism allied with political parties sympathetic to their aims, then we have strong grounds for assuming that this development will be a social disaster, leading to more wars, racism and authoritarianism. That, after all, is the legacy bequeathed by social and political nationalism, what can be called *ethno-politics*.

Universality, as opposed to cultural nationalism and division, remains the key site of conflict within the MWS. The battle remains, as it has since the Enlightenment, between those movements

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[6] Fear of co-optation by the political system is also a prevalent theme amongst reactionary populist movements.

which believe that all people are entitled to a decent quality of life, and those that privilege cultural national identities as the basis for a good society. Classical liberalism failed not because universality is flawed, but because liberalism lacked the resources to deal with the problems generated by the state, nationalism and capitalism. In short, liberalism should have evolved into a libertarian and democratic socialism, but the latter was thwarted by its own internal schisms and external enemies. The extent to which progressive populist social movements can defend reason and universality will be central to developments in the MWS in the Twenty-first Century.

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