

The Vices and Virtues of “Populisms”^{*†}

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Abstract

In this short essay, I will try to define contemporary populism in a “neutral” fashion; and to explore its virtues, as well as its (much better known) vices. To conclude, I shall attempt to draw up a balance sheet between its contrasting contributions to contemporary political life in Europe. To accomplish this, I will have to speak “generically” and, therefore, to ignore or set aside the traits populism has had and the outcomes it has produced in specific cases. I begin with the (hazardous) position that it can be good or bad for democracy... depending. And I will finally try to address the issue of the conditions under which it is more likely to harm or benefit the polity in which it has emerged.

Keywords: Democratic virtues; populism; party organizations; real-existing democracy; social movements.

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1 Introduction

No topic in the contemporary practice or study of politics is more debatable than "populism." Virtually every attempt at analyzing it begins with a reference to its "polysemic" nature. Both to its so-called and to its self-identified proponents, populism can mean many quite different things. Attempts to trace its historical genesis — usually, by going back to the "Progressive" movement at the end of the Nineteenth Century in the United States or even to the Narodniki movement in Russia — are unconvincing (at least, to this author). There is virtually no evidence of any historical continuity among the movements that have claimed to be or been called "populist" and the political conditions at the time were radically different from today's.

And, yet, the label has stuck. After it disappeared in the United States, it re-emerged in many different locations in Latin America and, in the last few decades, it has become ubiquitous in Western and Eastern Europe where — perhaps, for the first time — it is being applied by self-declared advocates. Previously, populism was, virtually by definition, something that can be or can do no good. It was almost always invoked as an epithet. Politicians and political scientists tended to use it to designate persons or movements they did not like or would not like to have come to power. In other words, to be called a "populist" was to be insulted and, if possible, excluded from "respectable" liberal democratic practice.

In this short essay, I will try the impossible: (1) to define contemporary populism in a "neutral" fashion; and (2) to explore its virtues, as well as its (much better known) vices.

To conclude, I shall attempt to draw up a balance sheet between its contrasting contributions to contemporary political life in Europe.

To accomplish this, I will have to speak "generically" and, therefore, to ignore or set aside the traits populism has had and the outcomes it has produced in specific cases. I begin with the (hazardous) position that it can be good or bad for democracy... depending. And I will finally try to address the issue of the conditions under which it is more likely to harm or benefit the polity in which it has emerged.

Alas, I have no comprehensive theory to offer for determining why and when it will emerge. I do, however, have a tentative hypothesis about its immediate origins — namely, that it is the product of a failure of the existing system of political parties to provide credible representation for "neglected" groups of citizens in what are otherwise "real-existing" democracies, i.e. liberal, constitutional, electorally competitive, capitalist ones. Why these party systems have so failed is a much more complicated issue that I have addressed elsewhere.¹

2 A Composite Definition

1. Populism is initially a social movement or personal following that transforms itself into a political party.
2. In so doing, it becomes oriented toward access to political power and eventually state authority by participating in elections.
3. It is not "anti-democratic," but "other democratic" in that it accepts the rules of the pre-existing democracy in which it emerges² and proclaims its conformity to prevailing democratic ideals.³
4. Populism is a partisan strategy for gaining access to public power through the ballot-box, not an ideology for exercising it.⁴

1. "Real-Existing Democracy and its Discontents," forthcoming in the *Chinese Journal of Political Science*.

2. It may subsequently seek to change those rules, but it does participate initially as a "loyal opposition" — even though, like all parties, it may engage in some mass demonstrations, disruptive activity, boycotts, etc.

3. Not infrequently, opponents of populists accuse them of "dissimulating" their real intentions and of violating these principles, if and when, they gain political power. There is no *a priori* reason for believing that populists are intrinsically more likely to dissimulate than their "liberal" or "social" democratic competitors. All politicians are capable of doing this. As for their choice of key concepts, populists easily "out-democratize" both liberal and social democrats. "Popular sovereignty" sounds far more democratic than "parliamentary sovereignty" or "constitutional fealty" — not even mention the, manifestly reactionary, favorite of conservatives in the United States: "original intent."

4. Which may be why so many observers refer to its "thin ideology."

5. The core of that strategy is "opportunism" — the search for issues and appeals that are either "transversal" (i.e. cut across those articulated by existing parties).⁵ or "nascent" (i.e. are ignored or under-stated by existing parties).
6. The issues and appeals that it exploits are bundled together into a dichotomous vision of political conflict, between a virtuous "people" who share these interests and passions and an obstructive, if not perverse, "elite" that does not.
7. Given the "opportunistic" and, hence, heterogeneous nature of this packaging process, populist parties rely heavily upon the personality of their leader or leaders who claim a unique capability for resolving objectives previously believed to be unattainable, incompatible or excluded.

This definition implies the following:

1. Since the lines of cleavage articulated by existing parties differ from polity to polity, so will the social bases and political programs of populism.⁶ Hence, it is more accurate to refer to *populisms* in the plural than to treat it as a single, more or less uniform, phenomenon.⁷
2. Since the focus is upon the person or personality of its leader, so will the fortune and effect of the movement depend on that person's political acumen (*virtù*). Here, the obvious theoretical link is to the literature on *charisma* and its historical role (*vide* Max Weber).⁸
3. Since the tactic is to combine disparate issues that have been under-played or ignored, so will its "ideology" be incoherent or inarticulate. Hence, when compared to established groups, its promises and payoffs will seem unrealizable or unpredictable and, hence, likely to produce unforeseeable consequences.
4. Since our focus here is upon populisms in contemporary Europe, so can it be presumed that, at least initially, the regime will be civilian, liberal democratic, constitutionalist, representative and capitalist. Therefore, the political party in question will be primarily focused upon winning fair elections through a competitive party system and will not have some sort of privileged access to or support from military and police forces.

Now, let us look schematically at what populisms can accomplish:

3 Virtues

1. Populisms de-consolidate sclerotic partisan loyalties and dissolve collusive party systems opening them up for the entry of new political formations.
 2. Populisms recruit persons who were previously apathetic & passive citizens and mobilize them to participate in the electoral process.
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5. In contemporary Europe, the EU is almost perfect for this purpose since it divides internally virtually all of the traditional centrist parties (with the exception of Christian Democrats) and has long been excluded from the agenda of electoral dispute precisely because of this.
 6. The Latin American literature has suggested a hypothesis that not only helps to explain the occurrence of populisms, but may provide a clue for distinguishing between "Left" and "Right" versions of it. Gino Germani in his sociological analysis of Peronismo came up with the concept of "status incongruence," — persons whose material and symbolic statuses were at odds with each other. In the Argentine case, it was upwardly mobile internal migrants whose material well-being had improved by their moving to the city, but who had been denied the status of full-citizenship by the country's land-owning dominant aristocracy who provided the core support for a form of "Leftist" populism. Inversely, it is downwardly mobile middle class citizens who have been stripped of their well-being and self-respect by globalization and finance capitalism that provide the raw material for contemporary "Rightist" populisms.
 7. In other words, populism can be civilian or military, progressive or regressive, Left or Right, rural or urban, "ethno-religious" or secular, bourgeois, proletarian or peasant based *e così via*.
 8. Needless to say, this is one of the most obvious source of weakness of populisms. In the Latin American case, very few managed to survive the demise of their founder/leader. Personismo is the exception and Maduro is cooping with the consequences as we speak.

3. Populisms by raising and combining disparate and/or ignored political issues encourage the articulation of suppressed cleavages and expectations.
4. Populisms challenge "accepted" external constraints and call into question existing and often exploitive dependencies upon foreign powers.
5. Populisms replace out-moded and formulatic party programs and ideologies and replace them with appeal based on the personality of leaders
6. Populisms exercise "decisionism," replacing policy immobilism and, thereby, expand the range of 'politically possible' solutions to collective problems.
7. Populisms need continuous popular ratification and, given the difficulty (if not outright impossibility) of achieving their heterogeneous promises to the citizenry, they will eventually be defeated at the polls, leaving in their place a reinvigorated party system.

Now, let us consider the (much more frequently expressed) defects or vices attached to populisms:

4 Vices

1. Populisms undermine existing party loyalties and stable choices between competing partisan programs without replacing with them with alternative ones.
2. Populisms recruit ill-informed persons who do not have consistent preferences and who seek 'emotional' rather than programmatic satisfactions from politics.
3. Populisms raise expectations that cannot be fulfilled and pursue policies that are incompatible, both of which produce negative externalities for everyone.
4. Populisms use foreigners and foreign powers as scapegoats for their own failings and weaken external linkages necessary for national welfare and security.
5. Populisms by shifting attention from issues and policies to persons and personalities introduce an erratic and opportunistic element into politics.
6. Populisms may be more decisive, but their decisions tend to be ill-conceived and disrespectful of long-term effects that are passed on the later generations.
7. Populisms may be capable of altering the rules and/or of gaining the support of military and security forces such that they cannot be peacefully removed from power.

5 A (Provisional) Balance Sheet

Item No. 7 in both the virtues and vices column is obviously the most critical one. Unless a populist ruler can be defeated electorally and replaced pacifically, the other items in the balance sheet become irrelevant. This is the primary reason why populism's role in countries undergoing democratization is so different from its role in those where liberal democracy is sufficiently embedded to ensure that no winner of its 'free and fair' elections will change the rules or rig the polling in order to disenfranchise his or her opponents in the future. Nor, presumably, will he or she have the capacity to manipulate military or security forces in order to perpetuate their hold over executive power.

Populism's virtue in undermining existing party organizations and their leaderships (Item No. 1) is more persuasive when the point of departure is one of sclerosis and/or collusion among existing contenders. The Iron Law of Oligarchy must have set in and become apparent to many citizens before such a disruptive force is unleashed. It would not be enough simply that parties are evenly matched or mutually obstructive. Inversely, populist leaders have occasionally been able to create organizations and ideologies (or, better, sets of slogans) that do manage to survive their defeat or death — *vide* Peron in

Argentina, Haya de la Torre in Peru or Cardenas in Mexico. And, it is not obvious that these formations are unavoidably more incoherent or corrupt than the ones they have competed against.

Item No. 2 in both columns hinges on the capacity of populist movements to recruit not just previously inactive citizens, but also those who have abstained or been repulsed by the choices presented to them. Given widespread evidence in established liberal democracies of large numbers of alienated citizens who do not join parties or even vote regularly, there is good reason to suppose that the "raw material" for such recruitment exists — and is increasing. The corresponding "vicious" claim that those who are recruited by populist appeals will be ill-informed and easily manipulated borders normatively on overt anti-democratic elitism — and remains unproven empirically. Even if one grants that its supporters are likely to be less well educated and less well-inserted in the labor market than those of better established political formations, this should be no reason to exclude them from exercising their rights as citizens or to denigrate their demands as inconsistent or emotional. Indeed, a good deal of non-populist politics in normal liberal democracies could be so characterized.

If populisms did not raise disparate, ignored or suppressed claims, they would not exist. It is their distinctive function (which they share with fascist movements) that they "vacuum up" dissatisfactions from diverse sources and bundle them into a simplified set of slogans — that only its leader can presumably resolve (Item No. 3). The likelihood that these claims cannot effectively be satisfied simultaneously is probably greater than those packaged together by more orthodox parties, but this is an omnipresent feature of all modern liberal democracies with "catch-all" parties that compete for the support of the median voter. Raising citizen expectations unrealistically is an endemic side-product of competitive partisan politics, not a monopoly of populist movements. What does seem distinctive is the tendency to pursue overambitious and incompatible goals without regard for cost or eventual consequence. Their "decisionism" (Item No. 6) makes this easier for populisms to accomplish, since they are held less in check by internal organizational structures or competing personalities. Whether their negative externalities — typically, budget imbalance, price and wage inflation and devalued currency — are so serious and so irreversible is an important element to be included in the (longer-run) balance sheet.

Item No. 4 focuses on the external dimension. Many (but not all) populisms deliberately challenge the constraints placed on their country by foreign powers, alliances or dependencies. Shifting the focus of opposition from internal to external enemies, *via* an appeal to nationalist sentiment, is a classic ploy to unite supporters across previous lines of cleavage and to isolate domestic opponents by accusing them of a lack of patriotism. The key question is whether these prevailing foreign connections are either more dispensable than they seem or can be reversed relatively easily when a "responsible" (non-populist) government comes to power. It is one thing to snub your nose at the IMF for a while; quite another to shift from one military alliance to its rival.

Not that long ago, leading scholars of "the politics of developing countries" took a page from Max Weber and argued that "charisma" was a useful and even indispensable instrument for managing the transition from colonial dependence to national democracy. Precisely by concentrating public attention upon their (allegedly) exceptional personal qualities, these leaders would be able to bring together social classes, ethnic groups and political generations divided over issues and ideologies, and mobilize entire populations for the task of "nation-building" (Item No. 5). Once the impact of these charismatic had been experienced, first in Latin America and, later in Africa, it became abundantly clear that they tended to leave in their wake more rather than less divided nations and weaker rather than stronger states. Nevertheless, they did manage to break oligarchic and/or colonial barriers and, in those cases where they were not followed by extended military rule, they also were capable of transforming their respective "followerships" into lasting and competitive political parties.

Populist leaders are supposed to make "big" decisions and, in so doing, they unavoidably take "big" risks. By combining the ability to mobilize with that of cutting through prevailing stalemates or collusive arrangements, they can expand the limits of the politically possible and set a polity on a trajectory that would have been otherwise impossible (Item 6). However, and this is the traditional lament of orthodox liberal economists, they often do so without calculating either the costs (and, especially, the revenues needed to cover these costs) or the externalities (and, especially, the longer term impact upon their own supporters). The "classic" result is endemic inflation, currency devaluation and, eventually, a bursting of the growth bubble — followed by a decline in income and/or entitlements for the very groups that

were originally privileged by their policies. If and when elections are held, it is this legacy that most often leads to their eventual defeat.

6 A (Provisional) Conclusion

Populisms have a legitimate place in liberal and social democracies. One could even say that they are inevitable given the likelihood of entropy inherent in these regimes. They have their distinctive virtues, as well as vices, and it is by no means evident that the latter always prevail. To paraphrase James Madison, any effort to exclude them from competition would be worse than the damage they could potentially produce.

A given populist movement will have a better chance of being more virtuous than vicious when the following conditions are present:

1. When democracy is sufficiently well-established in law, tradition and, especially, citizen expectations that the movement will not be able to make major changes in the rules unilaterally or to mobilize coercive forces to perpetuate itself in power.
2. When the followers that they mobilize are also willing to play according to the existing constitutional rules — however marginalized they have been by those rules and however much they desire to reform them.
3. When prevailing parties fail to represent salient cleavages within the citizenry and perpetuate historical ones that have lost their meaning.
4. When their leaders are oligarchic and cannot be removed by internal partisan politics and/or engage in collusion with each other to avoid conflicts that divide their respective publics.
5. When the polity is facing major social or economic choices that cannot be made or adequately exploited because existing political formations cannot make the necessary decisions due to partisan stalemate or entrenched privileged interests.
6. When the multiple promises populist leaders make are transformed sequentially and experimentally into public policies — however logically inconsistent and politically heterodox these policies may be.
7. When these policies are revocable at acceptable cost or do not introduce “sunken costs” and “path dependencies” that subsequent governments have to accept.
8. When the international context is neither polarized nor threatening and, hence, when external powers are more willing to tolerate “insubordination.”
9. When the foreign policies changed and challenges issued to hegemons by populist regimes are potentially reversible or relatively insignificant.
10. When the nationalist appeals made are inclusive of the population and not exclusive of targeted classes, *ethnies* or generations within the nation.
11. When the concentration on a single “charismatic” leader is mitigated by some forms of collective deliberation and internal accountability within the populist movement.
12. When the single, most visible and most responsible, leader is not personally corrupt and (even more difficult to satisfy) when he or she is capable of detecting corruption among followers and punishing it.
13. When populist leaders compete “freely and fairly” in regular elections and accept to leave office if they are defeated.

I would admit that this is quite a lengthy (and probably incomplete) list of conditions that would make populism a more virtuous occurrence for a given polity. Some are clearly more significant than others. Number 13, for example, is indispensable. Number 12 may be almost impossible to satisfy fully.

But the list is not prohibitive. Especially if one concedes the desirability of making a comprehensive judgment concerning the emergence of populism in a particular polity that would have to weigh specific items according its circumstances and also factor in the probable alternative type of government, then, there is a place for "positive" and not just "negative" populisms.