

## The Problem Is Not Populism, but the Failure of Liberal Democracy: Comments on Schmitter's Essay

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### Abstract

A comment on Philippe Schmitter's Essay "The Vices and Virtues of 'Populisms'" (*Sociologica*, 13(1), 2019)

Philippe C. Schmitter's recent essay on Populism provides an interesting starting point for a conversation on recent political phenomena in Europe and elsewhere, particularly on the future of democracy. Schmitter has been an insightful analyst of European politics for decades and this essay is no exception. It makes a number of important points while avoiding the usual (and wordy) pitfalls on the discussion: that populism, until recently, has almost always been a pejorative term; that what we understand as populism belongs to both right and left, and has an indeterminate class content; that populism gives voice to surplus societal demands not represented by traditional parties; and that populist parties can unsettle existing established party structures. The essay's admittedly condensed format identifying general features makes some of the more specific claims about the way that populist movements operate difficult to assess, as does the mostly European referent. While Italy's *Five Star Movement* seems to clearly fit the mold, it is not clear if Spain's *Podemos*, *La France Insoumise*, or the UK's *Momentum* do. And once we leave Europe to, say, Latin America, does Brazil's *Workers' Party* or Uruguay's *Frente Amplio* fit the bill?

But my main disagreement with the essay is more fundamental. While sharing the underlying sense of alarm, my worry is not with populism per se, but with liberal democracy and its institutions thirty years into neoliberalism. I also do not think that all populisms are the same, or operate in the same way. There is indeed a political contest over "the people" between different political projects, but left and right projects operate entirely differently in this regard. In contrast to political projects that further elite interests and narrow the boundaries of the political community (right-wing populisms), the opposite project is redistributive and seeks to broaden boundaries. There is, in other words, an emancipatory political project to be carried out in response to the failures and limits of liberal democracy. I prefer popular sovereignty to "left-wing populism." I briefly sketch out each of these arguments in turn, though

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in the same condensed format as Schmitter's essay. The fuller version of these arguments is in my recent book-length essay, *We, the Sovereign* (Baiocchi, 2018).

First, we need to interrogate what the surplus, unvoiced needs are that provide the fodder for right-wing populism. My contention is that after three decades into neoliberalism, liberal democracy and political parties working within its framework have reached a limit in terms of their ability to represent large swaths of the world's majority. Take Europe (Schmitter's reference) or North America in the last three decades and the conditions of the majority of the population of the continent: increased inequality, insecurity, lessened social mobility, and existential threats like climate change. With the vanquishing of state socialism, the very idea of an alternative to liberal democracy and free markets seemed to vanish, nearly overnight. As terribly flawed as state socialism had been, it provided a counterpoint of some kind to the existing order. We have witnessed a global rightward policy tilt so sharp over our lifetimes as to be dizzying. Relatively common-sense social democratic ideas — market regulation, unquestioned and universal provision of healthcare and education, that in the 1970s would have been a baseline against which leftists might push for equality and empowerment, are now fringe ideas of the far left.

In response, increasingly rigid social democratic and labor parties have tilted right in an attempt to capture an electoral "center" only to have their social base taken from them in many countries, where right-wing movements have been better able to give expression, however distortedly, to discontentment and existential fears. In response to the Right's organizing and full-throated political talk of the "people," (however narrow) these parties have responded with arid and pro-market policies, in an odd way becoming defenders of an establishment that has not worked for so many. And leftist parties, here meaning the broad swath of political formations to the left of social democracy, have not fared much better.

I tend to see the wave of horizontalist movements starting in the early 2010s as an attempt to voice societal demands that could not be expressed by this ossified political system. Nearly everywhere these movements came into tension with liberal democracy and existing political parties: Spain's *Indignados*, Portugal's *Desperate Generation* movement, the Greek *Indignant Citizen Movement*, the Chilean *Winter*, the US *Occupy* and *Black Lives Matter*, among many others. There is also a strong uniting theme that representative democracy has failed on its promises: it has failed to deliver meaningful representation, meaningful connection to common condition, and a meaningful experience of control over the conditions of peoples' lives. Whether we are talking of World-Cup mega projects in Brazil, runaway police violence in the United States, or market fundamentalism in Portugal, in each and every case activists insist that the institutions of representative democracy do not allow regular people to make decisions over things that impact them. In each and every case there are elites (sometimes named, like "the 1%") making those decisions and benefitting from them. The institutions of democracy — political parties, elections, consultations — serve only as a buffer behind which powerful interests can hide, and further as a limit on people's imaginations by dictating what is sensible.

The political project to give voice to these types of demands is sometimes described as left-wing populism, but popular sovereignty is a better label. Popular Sovereignty is an emancipatory project. It is a radical reinvention of the idea of democracy, one in which a historic block of the oppressed makes up the center of a political community that is open, egalitarian, and democratic, and is sovereign over its own fate, fundamentally empowered to reclaim public grounds and institutions. It recognizes that in order for this egalitarian political community to fully emerge, state actions are necessary to continue to democratize society. And it also recognizes that existing state institutions are not structured for popular sovereignty and that they need to be transformed as they are enlisted, constantly held in check by both democratizing popular pressures imbricated in its midst and counterweights outside of its boundaries. This transformation is a political project that will encounter resistance from those used to benefitting from previous arrangements, so the popular politics activated by state reforms need to act as a counterweight to elite power.

Popular Sovereignty is much more common in the Left in Latin America and Southern Europe, where the idea of combining the energies and democratizing forces of social movements with strong state institutions in a mutually transformative relationship to advance social justice is commonplace and has many different inflections. Popular sovereignty finds expression, in different ways in *Barcelona en Comú*, *Podemos*, Portugal's *Bloco de Esquerda*, *The Workers' Party* of Brazil in its heyday, Bolivarian revolution, the Zapatistas, radical movements in Bolivia, Ecuador and Uruguay, among many others. As

well, *Momentum*, *La France Insoumise*, *Die Linke*, *Syriza*, Bernie Sanders's *Political Revolution*, all to some extent reflect this political project as well.

It is a mistake, in my view, to consider these redistributive, pro-democracy, inclusive, and ultimately emancipatory political projects and movements as variants of the right-wing chauvinism and xenophobic political projects that have gained what seems to be an indelible foothold in Europe and elsewhere. They do indeed share some similarities in form, but this is because they are stepping into the same vacuum left behind by institutions and parties eroded by three decades of neoliberalism.

## References

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Gianpaolo Baiocchi is a sociologist and an ethnographer interested in questions of politics and culture, critical social theory, and cities. He has written about and continues to research instances of actually existing civic life and participatory democracy. His most recent work is *Popular Democracy: The Paradox of Participation* (Stanford University Press, 2016), which he co-authored with Ernesto Ganuza. *The Civic Imagination: Making a Difference in American Political Life* (co-authored with Elizabeth Bennett, Alissa Cordner, Stephanie Savell, and Peter Klein; Paradigm Publishers, 2014) examines the contours and limits of the democratic conversation in the US today. He is also the author, along with Patrick Heller and Marcelo K. Silva, of *Bootstrapping Democracy: Experiments in Urban Governance in Brazil* (Stanford University Press, 2011) and *Militants and Citizens: Local Democracy on a Global Stage in Porto Alegre* (Stanford University Press, 2005). He is the editor of *Radicals in Power: Experiments in Urban Democracy in Brazil* (Zed Press, 2003). An engaged scholar, Baiocchi was one of the founders of the 'Participatory Budgeting Project' and continues to work with groups improving urban democracy. He heads Gallatin's Urban Democracy Lab, which he launched in 2014 and which provides a space for scholars and practitioners to collaborate and exchange ideas for cultivating just, sustainable, and creative urban futures.