

The Populist Century

History, Theory, Critique

Pierre Rosanvallon

Translated by Catherine Porter

French 2020
Ed. polity - 2021

Originally published in French as *Le siècle du populisme: Histoire, théorie, critique*
© Editions du Seuil, 2020

This English edition © Polity Press, 2021

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
101 Station Landing
Suite 300
Medford, MA 02155, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-4628-2
ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-4629-9 (paperback)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021938630

Typeset in 10.5 on 12 pt Sabon
by Fakenham Prepress Solutions, Fakenham, Norfolk NR21 8NL
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon

The publisher has used its best endeavours to ensure that the URLs for external websites referred to in this book are correct and active at the time of going to press. However, the publisher has no responsibility for the websites and can make no guarantee that a site will remain live or that the content is or will remain appropriate.

Every effort has been made to trace all copyright holders, but if any have been overlooked the publisher will be pleased to include any necessary credits in any subsequent reprint or edition.

For further information on Polity, visit our website:
politybooks.com

CONTENTS

Introduction: Conceptualizing Populism	1
I Anatomy	
1 A Conception of “The People”: The People as One Body	15
2 A Theory of Democracy: Direct, Polarized, Immediate	21
3 A Mode of Representation: A Leader Embodying the People	27
4 A Politics and a Philosophy of Economics: National Protectionism	32
5 A Regime of Passions and Emotions	37
6 The Unity and Diversity of Populisms	45
II History	
1 History of Populist Moments I: Caesarism and Illiberal Democracy in France	59
2 History of Populist Moments II: The Years 1890–1914	70
3 History of Populist Moments III: The Latin American Laboratory	81
4 Conceptual History: Populism as a Democratic Form	89
III Critique	
Introduction	107
1 The Issue of Referendums	109

CONTENTS

2 Polarized Democracy vs. Pluralized Democracy	125
3 From an Imaginary People to a Constructable Democratic Society	135
4 The Horizon of Democrotorship: The Issue of Irreversibility	144
Conclusion: The Spirit of an Alternative	154
Annex: History of the Word "Populism"	160
<i>Notes</i>	172
<i>Works Cited</i>	201
<i>Index</i>	212

INTRODUCTION: CONCEPTUALIZING POPULISM

Populism is revolutionizing twenty-first-century politics. But the disruption it brings has not yet been assessed with any degree of accuracy. The word may turn up everywhere, but no theory of the phenomenon has emerged. The term combines a look of intuitive self-evidence with a fuzzy form, as attested first and foremost by the semantic slipperiness manifested in its usage. For it is a decidedly malleable word, so erratic are its uses. The term is paradoxical, too: even though it is derived from the positive foundations of democratic life, it most often has a pejorative connotation. It is also a screen word, for it applies a single label to a whole set of contemporary political mutations whose complexity and deepest wellsprings need to be grasped. Is it appropriate, for instance, to use the same term to characterize Chávez's Venezuela, Orbán's Hungary, and Duterte's Philippines, not to mention a figure like Trump? Does it make sense to put the Spaniards of Podemos and the followers of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's movement, La France Insoumise (France Unbowed), in the same basket with the fervent supporters of Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini, or Nigel Farage? To understand something requires making distinctions; it is essential to resist simplifying amalgamations. Populism is a dubious notion, finally, because it often serves only to stigmatize adversaries, or to legitimize old claims by the powerful and the educated that they are superior to the "lower" classes, which are always deemed likely to mutate into plebeians governed by sinister passions. We cannot address the question of populism without keeping this observation in mind, as a caveat as well as a call for political lucidity and intellectual rigor in approaching the subject.

This necessary attention to the pitfalls that underlie the term "populism" must not lead us to stop using it, however, for two

reasons. First, because in its very confusion it has proved unavoidable. If it has stuck to everyone's lips and remains on everyone's pen, despite all the reservations just mentioned, it is also because the term has responded, imprecisely but insistently, to a felt need to use new language to characterize an unprecedented dimension of the political cycle that has opened up at the turn of the twenty-first century – and because no competing term has surfaced so far. The newly launched political cycle is described by some as a pressing social expectation that the democratic project will be revitalized as the path of a more active sovereignty on the part of the people is rediscovered; others see it, conversely, as bearing signs that announce a threatening destabilization of that same project of revitalization. But the second decisive fact is that the term has been adopted with pride by political leaders seeking to pillory those who use it for the purpose of denunciation.¹ We could make a long list of figures on the right and the far right who have sought to overturn the stigma, first by saying that the word didn't scare them, and then by espousing it, over time. There has been a parallel evolution on the left, as attested in France in exemplary fashion by Jean-Luc Mélenchon: "I have no desire at all to defend myself against the accusation of populism," he said as early as 2010. "It's the elites expressing their disgust. Out with them all! Me, a populist? Bring it on!"² The fact that a certain number of intellectuals have become advocates of a "left populism" has also helped considerably to give the term a desirable consistency and to make it common currency as a political designation. The positions and writings of Wendy Brown, Nancy Fraser, Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe have weighed heavily in this direction, encouraging the retention of the word and validating the appropriateness of its use.

A reality to be theorized

The problem is that books devoted to populism, in their ever-increasing numbers, remain essentially focused on understanding the underpinnings of the populist vote in order to explain its spectacular advances throughout the world. Using the tools of electoral sociology and political science, these works characterize the populations involved, describing the values that motivate them, the way they relate to political life and institutions, and of course their living and working conditions, in various dimensions. Such investigations depict a social and cultural world that presents objective features common

to many countries: people living on the margins of large cities in zones affected by industrial decline who can be defined as among the "losers" in globalization, people with below-average incomes and little if any higher education. And these people are angry, as well: they are defined, more subjectively, by their resentment toward a system in which they see themselves as held in contempt and reduced to invisibility; they fear being robbed of their identities as their locales open up to the world and to immigration. By bringing together multiple data sets and proposing new ways of looking at the issue, some of the existing studies have offered a better understanding of the makeup of populist electorates. At the same time, however, they have effectively forestalled an overall grasp of the phenomenon. They tacitly suggest that populism is a mere symptom, an indicator pointing to other things that by implication should be the real focus of our attention: the decline of the "party" form, for example, or the gulf that has deepened between the political class and society at large, or the suppression of the gap between a right and a left equally incapable of facing up to the urgencies of the present. In these cases, what is being conceptualized is not the nature of populism but rather its causes. Works of this sort all end up proposing yet another analysis of political disenchantment and contemporary social fractures.

The frequent reduction of populisms to their status as protest movements, with a focus on the political style and type of discourse associated with such movements, is another way of failing to take their full measure.³ If the dimension of protest is undeniable, it must nevertheless not be allowed to mask the fact that protest movements also constitute actual political statements that have their own coherence and positive force. The routine references in such movements to political figures of the past, in particular to far-right traditions, lead here again to reductionist characterizations. While populisms often do arise from within such traditions, the phenomenon has now taken on an additional dimension (even apart from the development of a populism that purports to be on the left).

It is important to stress, too, the limits of the various typologies of populism that have been proposed and promoted. Describing the multiplicity of variants (on both the right and the left, with their differing degrees of authoritarianism, differences in economic policy, and so on) does not help us reach a better understanding of what is essential, what constitutes the kernel of invariant elements, and on what basis we can differentiate among the variants. At most, a typology can assign each particular case to a specific category: it is then nothing more than a list without rhyme or reason. One

journal deemed it useful to distinguish among the thirty-six families of populism!⁴ Such an exercise is the exact opposite of a work of conceptualization; it is only a way of masking the inability to grasp the essence of the thing under study.

The problem, then, is that these populisms, celebrated by some and demonized by others, have remained characterized in vague and therefore ineffective ways. They have essentially been relegated to viscerally expressed aversions and rejections, or else to projects summed up in a few slogans (as for example in the case of citizen-initiated referendums in France). This makes it difficult both to analyze their rising potency and to develop a relevant critique. If one seeks to grasp populisms, taken together in their full dimensions, as constituting an original political culture that is actively redefining our political cartography, it becomes clear that they have not yet been analyzed in such terms. Even the leading actors in populist movements, a few notable publications or speeches notwithstanding (we shall look at these later on), have not really theorized what they were (or are) animating. In historical terms, this is an exceptional phenomenon. From the eighteenth to the twentieth century, the major ideologies of modernity were all associated with foundational works that tied critical analyses of the existing social and political world to visions of the future. The principles of free-market liberalism were articulated by Adam Smith and Jean-Baptiste Say, Benjamin Constant and John Stuart Mill; socialism was grounded in the texts of Pierre Leroux, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Jean Jaurès, and Karl Kautsky. The works of Étienne Cabet and Karl Marx played a decisive role in shaping the communist ideal. Anarchism, for its part, was identified with the contributions of Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin. Conservatism and traditionalism found their champions in Edmund Burke and Louis de Bonald. The rules of representative government were elaborated with precision by the French and American founding fathers during the revolutions of the late eighteenth century. And many other names closer to our own day could be cited to highlight the process of revising and refining these pioneering works – a process implicit in the economic, social, and political evolutions of the world that have been under way for two centuries.

There is nothing of the sort for populism. It is linked to no work of comparable scope, no text commensurate with the centrality it has acquired.⁵ Its ideology has been characterized as soft, or weak. These qualifiers are deceptive, as populism's capacity to mobilize supporters makes clear; and while the adjectives cited convey implicit value judgments, they are not helpful. The problem is precisely that

the ideology of populism has never been formalized and developed, for the simple reason that its propagandists have seen no need to do so: the voters they attract are more attuned to angry outbursts and vengeful demonizing than to theoretical argument.

The objective of this book, then, is to propose an initial sketch of the missing theory, with the ambition of doing so in terms that permit a radical confrontation – one that goes to the very heart of the matter – with the populist idea. As the starting point for developing an in-depth critique of the idea on the terrain of social and democratic theory, we have to recognize populism as the rising ideology of the twenty-first century. The pages that follow are designed to carry out this task in three phases. The first part describes the anatomy of populism, constituting it as an ideal type. The second part presents a history of populism that leads to an integration of that ideal type within a general typology of democratic forms. The third and final part is devoted to a critique of populism.

The anatomy of populism

This part is built around a presentation of the five elements that make up populist political culture: a conception of “the people,” a theory of democracy, a mode of representation, a politics and a philosophy of economics, and a regime of passions and emotions. The conception of the people, based on the distinction between “them” and “us,” is the element that has been most often analyzed. I shall enrich the usual description, however, first by shoring it up with an analysis of the tension between the people as a civic body and the people as a social body, and second by showing how the term “people” has acquired a renewed capacity to shape the social world in an age of individualism based on singularities. The populist theory of democracy is based, for its part, on three elements: a preference for direct democracy (illustrated by the glorification of the referendum process); a polarized and hyper-electoralist vision of the sovereignty of the people that rejects intermediary bodies and aims to domesticate non-elective institutions (such as constitutional courts and independent authorities); and an understanding of the general will as capable of expressing itself spontaneously. The populist conception of representation is in turn linked with the foregrounding of the figure of a “leader standing for the people,” an individual who manifests a perceptible quality of embodiment, as a remedy for the existing state of unsatisfactory representation. National protectionism is another constitutive element

of the populist ideology, moreover, provided that it is understood as not limited to economic policy. National protectionism is in fact more deeply inscribed in a sovereignist vision of reconstructing the political will and ensuring the security of a population. The economic sphere is thus in this respect eminently political. Finally, the political culture of populism is explicitly attached to the mobilization of a set of emotions and passions whose importance is recognized and theorized here. I shall distinguish among emotions related to intellect (destined to make the world more readable through recourse to what are essentially conspiracy narratives), emotions related to action (rejectionism), and emotions related to status (the feeling of being abandoned, of being invisible). Populism has recognized the role of affects in politics and used them in pioneering ways, going well beyond the traditional recipes for seduction. Once the ideal type of populism has been fleshed out on the basis of these five elements, we shall examine the diversity of populisms, taking particular care to analyze the distinction between populisms on the left and those on the right.

The three histories of populism

Does populism have a history? While the answer to a question formulated in such general terms can only be in the affirmative, it must immediately be qualified, for that history can be conceptualized in three very different ways. First, one can simply consider the history of the word “populism”: this is the simplest approach and the one most commonly encountered. I shall wait to present its essential elements in an annex to this book, for it contributes relatively little to an understanding of our present situation. The word has in fact been used in three different contexts that are entirely unrelated to one another and only weakly related to what populism has come to mean today.

The term first appeared in the 1870s in the context of Russian populism, a movement of intellectuals and young people from well-to-do and even aristocratic backgrounds who were critical of projects for Western-style modernization of the country and sought to “go down to the people,” as they put it. They saw the traditions of agrarian communities and village assemblies as possible starting points for building a new society. The idea was that, in Russia, the peasantry would be the force for renewal, fulfilling the role the proletariat was expected to play in the West. This approach, which could

be called “top-down populism,” never mobilized the popular masses themselves. Nevertheless, it left a significant legacy, for some of the great figures in Russian anarchism and Marxism took their first steps as militants in that movement.

A decade later, it was in America that a People’s Party, whose supporters were commonly labeled populists, saw the light of day. This movement for the most part mobilized the world of small farmers on the Great Plains who were on the warpath against the big railroad companies and the big banks to which they had become indebted. The movement met with a certain degree of success in the early 1890s, but it never managed to reach a national audience, despite its resonant denunciation of corruption in politics and its call for a more direct democracy. (These themes were beginning to emerge everywhere in the country; they eventually gave rise to the Progressive Movement, which succeeded in developing a whole set of political reforms – the organization of primaries, the possibility of recalling elected officials, the recourse to referendums by popular initiative – that would be implemented in the Western states.) The People’s Party was an authentic popular movement, but it remained confined to a geographically circumscribed agricultural world; it failed to extend its appeal to working-class voters. None of the American populists appears to have been aware, moreover, of the earlier use of the term in Russia.

The word made its third appearance in France in 1929, in an entirely different and completely unrelated context. The “Manifesto of the Populist Novel” published that year was a strictly literary event: in the tradition of the naturalist movement, the manifesto urged French novelists to focus more on depicting popular milieus. Forerunners such as Émile Zola and contemporaries such as Marcel Pagnol and Eugène Dabit were evoked in support of this literary populism. There were no interactions at all between this third “populist” movement and either of its predecessors, nor did any of the three prefigure contemporary uses of the term populism, contrary to what ill-informed references sometimes suggest.

A second type of history allows us to advance in a more suggestive manner in the comprehension of contemporary populism: this is the history of moments or regimes that, without having invoked the label, resonate with our concerns today and make it easier to understand the dynamics of the essential components of populism. I have focused on three of these. First, France’s Second Empire, an exemplary illustration of the way in which the cult of universal suffrage and of referendums (called “plebiscites” at the time) could

be linked to the construction of an authoritarian, immediate, and polarized democracy, one that would be qualified as “illiberal” today. What is of interest in the context of the current study is that this regime theorized its project, spelling out the reasons why it viewed the democracy it was establishing as more authentic than the liberal parliamentary model. Next, the Latin American laboratory of the mid-twentieth century, illustrated initially by Colombia’s Jorge Eliécer Gaitán and Argentina’s Juan Perón: these regimes bring clearly to light the conditions for expressing and enacting embodied representation, as well as the mobilizing capacity of the opposition between an oligarchy and the people in societies that were not based on European-style class structures. Finally, going back to the prewar period 1890–1914, we find a good vantage point for observing the rise of populist themes at the point of the first globalization, most notably in France and in the United States: what took place during this period sheds light on the conditions under which political divisions beyond the traditional right/left opposition were redefined. And it also helps us see how the populist wave of the period was brought to a halt. In effect, we are invited to consider a future that did not materialize. While the present always remains to be written, and while it is important to be skeptical of analogies that downplay this fact, the three periods I have evoked nevertheless offer food for thought.

A comprehensive global history of populism defines a third approach, one that might be called inseparably social and conceptual. It seeks to deepen our understanding of the present by considering the past as a repertoire of aborted possibilities, a laboratory of experiments that invite us to reflect on incompletions, reversals, and gropings in the dark. Here we are dealing with a long history of the problematic character of democracy. It is not the history of an ideal model whose germination we would study, thinking that it might one day be fully and completely realized. There is nothing linear about the history of democracy: it is constituted rather by continuous intellectual conflicts over its definition as much as it is marked by intense social struggles around the establishment of certain of its principal institutions (yesterday’s conquest of universal suffrage or today’s recognition of minority rights come to mind). It is a history of unkept promises and mangled ideals in which we remain completely immersed, as is obvious from the intensity of the contemporary disenchantment with democracy and the difficulty of finding the conditions that would allow us to institute an authentic society of equals. This tumultuous history is inseparable from the structural

indeterminacy of adequate forms for democracies, given that the appropriate modalities for the exercise of collective sovereignty, the establishment of norms of justice that would allow the construction of a world of equals, and the very definition of “the people” all remain subject to controversy. At the same time, impatience on the part of some and fear on the part of others have led to a constant radicalization of the processes by which both the breaks with the past to be achieved and the gains to be preserved are perceived. In this context, I shall describe populism as a limit case of the democratic project, alongside two other limit cases: those of minimal democracies (democracies reduced to the rights of man and the election of leaders) and essentialist democracies (defined by the institution of a societal authority in charge of building public welfare). Each of the latter two forms, by virtue of its structure and its history, is threatened by a specific mode of degradation: a slide toward elective oligarchies in the case of minimal democracies and a totalitarian turn of power against society in the case of essentialist democracies. When the populist form of democracy that I have characterized as polarized is the basis for a regime, it runs the risk, for its part, of sliding toward *democratorship*⁶ – that is, toward an authoritarian power that nevertheless retains a (variable) potential for being overturned.

On critiques of populism

The most common political critique of populism charges it with illiberalism, that is, with a tendency to make the (“societal”) extension of individual rights secondary to the affirmation of collective sovereignty, and a simultaneous tendency to challenge the intermediary bodies accused of thwarting the action of the elected authorities. I myself spoke, some twenty years ago, of “illiberal democracy” with regard to the Second Empire,⁷ and I have used the term more recently with respect to populist regimes. The term still seems appropriate to me in almost all cases in which it is used to characterize an observable tendency. But I no longer believe that it can serve as an axis around which to build an effective critique (that is, a critique that advances arguments capable of modifying an opposing opinion), for the simple reason that the leading voices of populism explicitly denounce liberal democracy for curtailing and hijacking authentic democracy. Vladimir Putin, a propagandist for a democracy labeled “sovereign,” has asserted forcefully that liberalism has become “obsolete,”⁸ while Viktor Orbán, for his part, has insisted that “a democracy is

not necessarily liberal.”⁹ Thus it is on the grounds of a democratic critique of populism that the new champions of this ideal need to be interrogated and contested.

Political life is a graveyard of critiques and warnings that have been powerless to change the course of events. I encountered this phenomenon while studying the history of the nineteenth century in France, when I saw, for example, the inability of the republican opposition to Napoleon III to get its arguments across to the French populace as a whole. The French rose up against a regime that they rightly denounced for quashing freedom, but at the same time they were incapable of seeing through the regime’s claim that its recourse to plebiscites served to honor the sovereignty of the people more than its predecessors had.¹⁰ In other words, their intelligence was not equal to their indignation. And this is the case today with those who settle for a liberal critique of populism. This book seeks to break the spell by proposing an in-depth critique of the democratic theory that structures the populist ideology.

This endeavor begins with a detailed analysis of the limits of referendums with respect to a project for achieving democracy. Next, it addresses the question of democratic polarization by emphasizing that a democracy that proposes to make a collectivity responsible for its own destiny cannot be based solely on the exercise of majoritarian electoral power. Since this latter is simply a conventional but notoriously imperfect manifestation of the general will, the general will has to borrow complementary expressions in order to give more consistent body to the democratic ideal. The notions of “power belonging to no one” and “power belonging to anyone at all,” two other ways of grasping the democratic “we,” are examined here, along with the institutional arrangements that may be attached to them, in order to stress the narrowing implied by an exclusively electoralist vision of power belonging to all. I shall also demonstrate in this context that institutions such as constitutional courts and independent authorities, generally viewed only through the prism of their liberal dimension, have a democratic character first and foremost. In effect, they constitute a guarantee for the people in contentious encounters with its representatives. By the same token, this approach is an invitation to conceptualize the relations between liberalism and democracy, that is, between freedom and sovereignty, in inclusive rather than exclusive terms. I shall also examine the popular conception of the notion of “the people” by advancing a sociological critique of the opposition between the 1 percent and the 99 percent. In this context, the notion of a “democratic society to

be constructed” is opposed to that of an imaginary “people as one body.”

These assorted critiques of a theoretical nature will be supplemented by critiques focused on the *practices* of populist regimes, and in particular the conditions under which the polarization of institutions comes into play: modifications of the role and modes of organization of constitutional courts, and suppression or manipulation of independent authorities and especially of electoral oversight commissions, where they exist. To these elements I shall add data concerning policies toward the media, associations, and opposition parties. Taken together, all these elements give body to the qualifier “illiberalism,” which takes on a meaning that we can then assess concretely (the relation between the practices and the justifications of France’s Second Empire will be highlighted in this context). Here I shall pay specific attention to the legal arrangements adopted in order to secure the irreversibility of these regimes and their installation for the long run, most often through the removal of restrictions on term limits.

The alternative

Before it can be studied as a problem, populism has to be understood as a proposition developed in response to contemporary problems. This book takes populism seriously by analyzing and critiquing it as such a proposition. But a critique can only fulfill its role completely if it goes on to sketch out an alternative proposition.¹¹ The final pages of this study are devoted to such an effort. They present the major features of what could be a generalized and expansive sovereignty of the people, one that enriches democracy instead of simplifying or polarizing it. This approach is based on a definition of democracy as ongoing work to be undertaken in a process of continuous exploration, rather than as a model whose features could be faithfully reproduced without further conflict and debate over its adequate form.