

# CONTEMPORARY POPULISMS

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*Abstract:* The rise of right-wing populism in recent years can be interpreted as a direct consequence of the crisis in the relationship between traditional parties and the civilian population. A careful reflection on this phenomenon, though, requires a more extensive and ramified explanation of its material and ideological causes. A significant role has also been played by the inability of the media and institutions to understand the needs of less well-to-do classes, driven, as they are, to search for alternatives in right-wing populism. This is accompanied by the structural crisis within the traditional left-wing political parties and their movements. They were unable to respond in a credible way to the devastating socio-economic effects of the 2008 global crisis and are now unable to restore a balance between welfare and development at a time when financial capital is volatile. These considerations are then augmented by a series of comparisons between the many forms that populism has taken both in the western world and beyond, in particular comparisons between protectionist populism in the United States, nationalism in Turkey and Hindu extremism in India. Taking these differences into account, today's populism seems to have originated in the cyclical worsening of popular resentment and in the weakening of social democratic bonds between social classes. These tensions can only be countered by politics that are more human and attentive to the actual needs of the civilian population.

*Keywords:* populism, global crisis, democracy, liberty, equality.

A report in the *Financial Times* on President Trump's inaugural compared it to President Obama's first inaugural and declared: "Obama radiated hope. Trump channeled rage" (Luce 2017). This is factually correct. But if so, the fact needs diagnosis. Why hope then and rage now? An obvious answer is because the hope was not fulfilled and so roughly half the electorate refused to believe that Obama's anointed successor in the Democratic party – nor even the orthodox core of the Republican party – would fulfill it either. Brexit seems to be channeling the same rage against Britain's political establishment. But the political establishment is not a self-standing class. Even a glance at the lineup of support for the Remain vote and for Clinton (both in the primaries against Sanders and in the presidential elections) shows the extent to which what underlies this political class is a parade of corporate

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and banking elites, ranging from the IMF, Wall Street, OECD, and Soros, to the Governor of the Bank of England.

That leads into the subject of how to understand the meaning of “populism” as a term of opprobrium. The term is defined as “ordinary people’s opposition to elites”. So defined, it is too under described to be a term of opprobrium. After all *democracy* is intended to give ordinary people a chance to counter elites through representative politics. What populism today seems to add to democracy is that it also opposes the power of *unelected* officials with specific economic interests to dominate the formation of policies – with the general acquiescence of elected representatives.

But this still does not capture what we instinctively recoil from in populism. How can it be wrong to oppose the voluntary implicit surrender of sovereignty by elected law and policy makers to unelected wielders of elite financial interests?

Brexit is a good example of “populism” to focus on to get clear about the issues that we face and also to get clear about why “populism” has come to mean something pejorative. The underlying issues raised by Brexit are about the working class’s relation to the European Union. What prompted the larger part of a voting population to opt for Brexit? Well I am not going to answer that but instead I want to step back and ask a much for fundamental question about the European Union as a supra national site of political economy. Let’s put ourselves in the shoes of a working (or workless) person in Nottingham (or for that matter in Crete or Seville). Suppose such a person were to ponder the humane policies that some nations in Europe came to embrace since the Second World War, policies which provided safety nets (whether of health or education or housing) for people like him. He might ask: what was the site where these safety nets were administered and implemented? And he would answer: well, the site of the nation. He might scratch his head and wonder: Has there ever been a supra-national site at which welfare was ever administered? What would a mechanism that dispensed it at a supra-national site even so much as look like? Now, as Joseph Stiglitz says in his book on the European Union (Stiglitz 2017) there are two ways to respond to the present crisis that prompts the populist response in Europe – to withdraw from the union or to strengthen the ties with the union. But given these excellent questions that the worker from

Nottingham is asking, why would he acquiesce in the strengthening of the links with the European Union? What these questions reveal is that to this day it has not been clarified why a perfectly well-functioning Common Market moved on to the further integration of a common currency without any understanding of the wider institutions of governance that would be needed for such integration. The worker's questions, reflecting fundamental and absolutely elementary skeptical concerns that working people should generally have about greater integration reveal the good side of populism, the side of populism which is the opposition by ordinary people to the elites, in the case of Europe, the banking elites.

Now, of course, such a person might go on beyond these shrewd questions to associate supra-national affiliation with immigrant hordes who not only deprive him of economic opportunities, but dilute the centuries long national culture of which he is so proud. But there is no logical link between those excellent former questions and these latter trumped up anxieties. One may rightly ask the questions without having these anxieties. The linking of the two is quite confused and uncompulsory and it is the bad side of populism.

But the link is constantly made. So a question arises: whence the compulsion to make this *uncompulsory* link? And here we must resist the temptation to blame the people themselves. The assumption they make of such a link is not due to their feebleness of mind but to a wide variety of distortions not only by the media they read and watch, but by the political class, and not just the extreme elements of that class but the political establishment. We cannot forget that the British Prime Minister's Remain campaign ratcheted up the immigration theme to prevent its being owned by his more extreme Right opposition, just as Obama in his first campaign was far worse on immigration than John McCain, again with a view to gaining ownership of a Republican platform, for electoral gains.

So the lesson is this. Even if we identify what we recoil from in populism as the uncompulsory linking of sound questions with unsound anxieties, this cannot simply be attributed to an *intrinsic incapacity* in the judgment of ordinary people, but must be attributed to the failure of public education provided by the media, the universities, and the political class. One cannot believe in de-

mocracy and dismiss the electorate as vile or stupid. For the electorate is shaped by what *knowledge* it possesses.

For twenty hundred years, philosophers have said that the central ethical question is: What ought we to do? Or, How ought we to live? But in our own complex time, the more crucial prior question has become: What ought we to know?

It is not entirely surprising that what we ought to know is not well served by the universities and the media. I recall the very first day I arrived at my college in Oxford, the Master of the College, Christopher Hill, said to me with his characteristic inward-looking smile, “You do realize Mr. Bilgrami that Oxford has a centuries long tradition of producing the ruling class”. If he is generally right about that, it has becoming increasingly clear that the media have over the centuries been generally known to sustain that ruling class. So, it is perhaps wrong to expect these institutions of the academy and media to be the sites of the much needed public education on the fundamental matters that shape the *common good* in our societies. Where the public got educated on the issues on which there have been fundamental transformations in our societies have tended to be *movements*, broadly movements of the Left, movements of labor in the long social democratic tradition of Europe (now ebbing to the point of non-existence) or in the United States in the 1930s, and then the civil rights and anti-war and women’s movements of some decades later, and also the great prolonged anti-colonial movements in countries of the South.

So, on the phenomenon of contemporary populism, speaking at the most general and the most basic level, one might identify essentially two underlying causes: 1) a chronic crisis of political economy and 2) the failure of the Left to find an adequate response to it. It is a reaction to political economies in their neo-liberal mode of the last few decades: its inability to create sufficient employment, its generating acute and seemingly irreversible inequalities, its systematic destruction of the bargaining power of labor, its undermining of national sovereignties over their own economies, its making immigration, which could be a source of strength for national economies, into a deep source of anxiety and complaint among working people etc. And the failure of the Left to mobilize an adequate respond to these crisis conditions creates what we might call a “movement vacuum”. Just as there can be a power vacuum, there can be a movement vacuum. And so ex-

treme right wing nationalist movements, that is to say “populism” in the pejorative sense of the term, step into the vacuum. Such a vacuum, no doubt owes to the failure of public imagination on the part of the Left, but to be fair, Left movements today are increasingly constrained by the turn that political economies taken in these last few decades.

First of all the old style movements based on trade union activism are hardly possible because ever since the nature of capital itself has changed from industrial capital to the dominance of finance capital, trade unions in the traditional sense have only a residual form of agency; and in any case, such unions as are still in place, have been beaten down by neo-liberal economic policies that generate chronic unemployment and the informalisation and impermanence of employment in many parts of the world, which undermines the bargaining power of unions for the obvious reason that corporations can always tap the unemployed population if the employed population bargains very hard. And most crucially of all, ever since the tremendous increase in the mobility of capital after the Bretton Woods institutions were re-mantled, even if a working class movement throws up the possibility of progressive policies, those possibilities mostly can't really be implemented because of the fear of capital flight. Thus, for example, Lula, as a result of a working class movement, got elected on a very progressive platform in Brazil but was not really able to implement it out of fear of capital flight. If they were to be implemented and there was capital flight (quite apart from the hardship caused by that to working people), *movements would have to be waiting at the place to which capital flies to*. And that form of international solidarity in the global labor force is not a realistic possibility. The mind boggles at the idea of a serious possibility of *global* labor movements to oppose global finance capital. I myself think that that is just fantasy, a fantasy expressed by some political theorists such as Hardt and Negri with such terms as “multitude” (Hardt and Negri 2004).

What, I believe, is more plausibly within our public imagination, at least for countries of the South, where I come from, which are suffering from the oppressiveness of these neo-liberal policies in our period of financial globalization, is that they would be better off de-linking (at least partially) from the global economy and getting sovereignty over their own nations' political economies.

Such ideas need to be explored in serious detail. They may require the devising of alternative credit agencies (alternative to the IMF and World Bank), they may require partial South-South relinking so as to protect some of the smaller economies of the South, and so on. These are all under-explored ideas worth thinking about and it would take a great deal of public imagination on the part of the Left to do so.

So far I've spoken of the deeper underlying common causes of the dissatisfactions in working people that give rise to the populist upsurge in different parts of the world. But this is not at all to suggest that the character of the populisms in different parts of the world are all exactly the same. They are, in fact, substantially different. Thus, for instance, in America, there is a very distinctive element, the heartland's working people's hatred of the elites of the coastal metropolises. This has deep roots in settler colonialism in America and goes back to the settler colonial attitudes towards land as what defines America, with the traders and merchants who came to occupy the emerging metropolises such as New Amsterdam (now called New York) viewed as upstarts who never really shared that relation to the land in the mass of the country. This rural/frontier versus urban divide is not restricted to America and may be found in a strong suspicion of merchants and the corrupting power of money in all of Anglo settler colonialism, which is why all capital cities built in the 19th century were located far away from the commerce-dominated cities – just to mention a few, Washington, Ottawa, Canberra, Pretoria. But in America the suspicion has survived in the recurring populist resurgences in America. The original American populist – Andrew Jackson – as is widely known, represented precisely this hatred of the urban elite (and apparently he is one of Trump's heroes even though Trump is not quite sure which century Jackson lived in). And it is the settler colonial idea of cultivated *land* as the real source of wealth which is the genealogical basis of middle America's anti-intellectualism and resentment of urban elites as parasites. It is essentially the Lockean idea of relationship to land –and we may recall that Locke had declared America to be the exemplar – which was then later developed as a Physiocratic idea in its sophisticated form).

India too is quite distinctive in a quite different way in that the populism generated by Narendra Modi is in fact a pro-

globalization populism rather than the instinctive anti-globalization in the populisms of the United States and Europe, and the populism glorifies cities as the future which will convert an entire nation's population into a prosperous middle class. What in fact makes the populism of Modi what it is the enthusiastic middle class support for him, blind to Piketty's analysis which points to the illusion of thinking that global political economies of the last century have made upward mobility possible. And what is interesting about India and Turkey is that they both combine their pro-globalization populism that is increasingly joined by a growing middle class with a revivalist stress on majoritarian religious identities. But in Turkey it is the fact of the complete integration of these religious identities with the commitment to neo-liberal globalization that ensures that they will never pass over on to jihadi forms of so-called anti-imperialist Islamism that have characterized Iran in the past as well as a wide range of Arab global Islamist networks like Al Qaeda.

Both India and Turkey are also compulsively authoritarian in a way that borders on fascism and that needs it's a distinctive account as well. I will explore this now and restrict myself to India. Indian Hindu nationalism, which today bears alarming similarities to Italy and Germany in the nineteen thirties is, unlike as is suggested by Perry Anderson's sloppily off beam analysis of India's freedom movement, a radical departure from the nationalism of the long struggle in India against British colonial rule. This needs to be spelt out a little patiently.

An indirect though illuminating way to bring this out is to look at why exactly it was that Gandhi did not claim to be a *secularist* (nor by the way did Nehru for almost the entire span of the long national movement). Gandhi's view was that secularism arose out of the distinctive nature of European History and since that history had no counterpart in India, it was not compulsory for India. In his view, the rise of the new sciences and their increasing elevation to centrality in European culture, starting with England, and then moving all across Europe, older forms of justification of state power that focused on the divine right of the state as it was personified in its monarch, came to be seen as unsustainable. At the very same time a new form of entity was emerging after the Westphalian peace. Both these developments converged to produce a radically new political outlook. State power now came to

seek its legitimacy in a quite different and far more mundane source, no longer in theology, but, for want of a better word, in political psychology. It must be made to rest on a feeling, a feeling present in the people over whom it exercised power. The feeling that they were to cultivate was not to be directly a feeling for the state itself. Rather it was to be toward the new form of entity that was spawned by the Westphalian peace, the nation. This entity was of course partly defined in terms of territorial boundaries. But that did not by any means suffice to characterize it. The characterization was not complete until it was fused with a new form of increasingly centralized state, which integrated the more scattered locations of power of a previous time. Thus it was that the nation and the state were existentially fused in their status, undecouplable from each other, an inseparability identified by a hyphen. And so, a feeling among the populace for the first half of the hyphenated conjunction (nation) bestowed upon its second half (the state) a new form of legitimacy for the exercise of its power. Later, this kind of feeling came to be called “nationalism” and the justification it provided for state power was both fundamental and peculiar to the European modern until it began to spread via colonial conquest to other lands.

Gandhi then points out that the emergence of secularism as a doctrine requires one to look closer at the strategy by which this political psychology, this feeling for the nation and thereby legitimacy for the state, was generated all over Europe. It was done by a method, which had its apotheosis in Germany in the 1930s and 40s of the last century, though its work was done well before that. It was the method of generating a feeling for the nation as ours by finding an external enemy within the territory and describing it as “them”, the outsider within, to be despised and suppressed as “the Other”. Of course, by the time it came to that hideous culmination in Germany, religion played little, if any, role in the ideology by which the strategy was wielded. Race loomed far larger in the rhetoric. But in earlier exercises of such nation-building and state-legitimizing exercises in Europe, religion was often a central factor. When numerical and statistical forms of discourse came to be applied to the study of society and governance, notions of majority and minority were constructed and this method would come to be described as majoritarianism. Often religious majoritarianism would generate a religious minoritarian backlash; and the vio-



lence of civil strife that this, in turn, generated made it seem as if religious majoritarian nationalism was not the fundamental source of the problem any more, even if it was where the fault line started, but it was religion itself that contaminated the polity – and until it was steered to sites distant from the orbit of the state (or more generally, the polity), in places of personal life and civil society, the strife could not be quelled. And so it was that the doctrine of secularism emerged as a large and corrective measure, essentially, as this narrative shows, to be a counter to a process that starts with a nationalism founded on religious majoritarianism.

And then Gandhi goes on to explicitly argue that since India never had gone through these nation-building exercise that gave rise to the damage that secularism was devised to repair, it would be a pointless mimicry of Europe to embrace it in India – as he argued when he wrote in the first quarter of the century on this subject (and I this he was echoed by Nehru in *The Discovery of India*). India's past was an unselfconsciously pluralist religious society with Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians etc. living side by side in a syncretic culture, and so there was no need to impose a self-conscious policy of secularism that is necessary only when pluralism gets destroyed by religious majoritarian nation-building exercises. Indeed he sought to preempt that form of "nation" in India, by equating nationalism with a quite different idea, that of anti-imperialism, a movement drawing on plural religious traditions in the country to oppose India's colonial masters. Thus India in his time of writing, given the issues that were central then, was a context in which secularism had no relevance, something that cannot be said of India since the 1980s and most virulently in the last few years where conditions replicate European forms of nationalism in the 1930s and 40s have emerged with real force and the contextual relevance of secularism emerged therefore with an urgency to match.

And the replication of that nationalism is quite detailed. Apart from the feature of finding the external enemy within (the Muslim) and despising and subjugating it, there are several other details: above all there is the sinister and powerful paramilitary organization of the RSS shaping the ideological outlook of the government (no other right wing nationalism in the world, so far as I know has anything quite like this); then there is the menace of a vigilante youth group (the ABVP) mimicking the Balillas in

Mussolini's Italy, bullying students on campuses who raise deep questions about caste or about economic inequality or about Kashmir etc.; then there is the calling critics of the government "treasonous" and "anti-national"; then there is the constant talk of purity in caste which echoes racist attitudes on blood and descent in European fascism, and finally there is the "fusion" of the interests of the corporations and the state which was Mussolini's explicit definition of fascism and which is exemplified in the strident neo-liberal aspirations of the Indian government with widespread support among a wide range of classes including of course, as I said, the middle classes. And this last point brings us to the question of Modi's *compulsive* authoritarianism.

A safe generalization we can make from the history of nations in the last century is that capitalist democratic states, unlike authoritarian states, achieve their effects through what Gramsci called "hegemony", by which is meant that a ruling class gets to have its way by convincing all other classes that its interests are the interests of all other classes. Authoritarian states need to be authoritarian precisely because this form of consent by all to pursue the interests of the ruling class is missing. If something like this generalization is true, then we must infer that the present government in India either lacks the popular consent that is characterized by the notion of hegemony and that it so boastfully congratulates itself on having, or it *has* that consent from a broad spectrum of classes and so its authoritarianism is pathological in some way that approximates what we may rightly call "fascism".

Let us ask why fascism is so puzzling to us. I think that is so because we cannot explain it in the usual way as being a product of capitalist tendencies. The crisis generated by and within capitalism may be one of the *prompting* conditions for fascistic developments, as I said earlier, but I don't think the tendencies of capital are *sufficient to explain* them. There is a very important book on imperialism that has just come out by Utsa and Prabhat Patnaik which demonstrates how imperialism is at the heart of the tendencies of capitalism. But I think part of why fascism is more mysterious to us than imperialism is that the tendencies of capitalism do not suffice to explain it. You have to bring in significant other or further factors to explain it.

Let me end, then, by returning to the United States and saying a few things that are completely obvious but all the same need

saying. It is no news to say that Trump is a combination of a xenophobe, a racist, a misogynist, and, I suppose, as we have been witnessing in his pronouncements, something of an idiot. So, of course many people are understandably shocked and dismayed by his election and the protests are most heartening. But, as is also obvious, the deeper issues, however, are not about how terrible Trump is, but about why he got elected in the first place. What does his election signify about the electorate's instincts and dissatisfactions? Everyone knows that his constituency is the white working population. And I suppose that from the point of the view of the Left, that looks like a classic case of false consciousness – I mean to expect that a Trump-led government will address these dissatisfactions. But, we should also remember that there was an even more classic form of false consciousness when the African-American population voted in far larger numbers for Clinton rather than Sanders. That was sheer identity politics dominating over material interests. Sanders would have done much more for working and workless blacks than Clinton. We can't forget that Bill Clinton signed an infamous bill that took away welfare provisions from the blacks. And Hillary Clinton subscribed to exactly the same economic ideology (despite the few concessive noises she was forced to make in her presidential campaign as a result of Sanders's success in it). It is true that the Clintons are not racist in the social sense, but from the material point of view, Sanders's economic policies were much more in their interests. Sanders honorably refused to play identity politics and he paid the price for it. If African Americans had voted in large numbers for Sanders, he would have won the primaries.

The hand-wringing and the hysteria about Trump's election and post-election pronouncements, though perfectly understandable and justified – since he is monstrous on a whole range of issues – nevertheless may have the effect of giving the impression that there was some real intrinsic merit to the political establishment that Clinton represents. That would be complacent. Clinton is about as establishment a figure as you can find in the United States. That was part of what gave Trump his election victory. Unlike India, America has a two party system, and there is by and large consensus between them on the fundamentals. They are, as C. Wright Mills put it, "competing power elites". While they compete with each other, overall there's agreement on the funda-

mentals. So it is very hard for anybody to break in. Sanders went as far as anybody has gone from within one of the two parties, but predictably the Democratic Party pulled the plug on Sanders. Throughout the primaries the party worked against him in subtle ways, and then more openly, when he began to get a lot of support. They wanted Clinton to get the nomination. So did Wall Street. So did all of the liberal media. It is, among others, working people who saw some promise in Sanders, who did not trust Clinton and the party orthodoxy. Why? Well, they produced the financial crisis of 2008 and in response to the crisis they saved the bankers who were responsible for it, not the working people, who were hurt by it. Days after Obama was elected in 2008, he appointed people like Summers and Geitner to his economic team, figures associated with the creation of the crisis. During his campaign, he had a wide circle of economists advising him, which included Joseph Stiglitz and Robert Reich. But immediately after he got elected, he zipped himself up in a Clinton suit and froze them out. Right from the beginning it became clear that Obama was going to be part of the political establishment. And Hillary Clinton was his natural and named successor in the party. So when working people feel that they have no options from either party, they turn to a mavericks on each side (Sanders and Trump).

My own view is that it should go without saying that Clinton would have been better than Trump, but if it goes without saying, then don't say it. Because to keep saying it may give rise to the complacency that the political establishment in the US has intrinsic merit. The far better form of resistance to the abomination of Trump's victory is to work to rejuvenate the Democratic party and steer it away from its orthodoxies that Clinton represents. But, alas, that is not unlikely to happen, not only because that party's learning curve is flat, but also because there is this constant sneering about Sanders's populism by the orthodoxy.

As I said all these points are obvious to any attentive political observer. There are no doubt similarly obvious points to be made about a range of other societies in which populist upsurges have developed. What is less on the surface and what needs far more careful analysis is not just that there is the suffering of working people, but how deeply alienated virtually every society on the globe has become as a result of developments in the global political economy of the 1980s. Now, I mention this neo-liberal period,

not to suggest that the alienation is something recent. The alienation is so deep-set because it has accumulated over centuries. What has happened since the 1980s rather is just a reversal of the relatively humane efforts of a brief heterodox post-war interregnum. When someone writes the history of political economy two or three hundred years from now and focuses on the long trajectory of modernity, ever since the rise of capital in the Early Modern period in Europe and its diffusion through imperial conquest, they will remark on how strange and eccentric a blip was the period of three decades after the second world war, roughly the Keynesian period of demand management and humane efforts to put *constraints* on capital. And the populism of the present which, I believe, has as its deepest cause the acutely alienating consequences of the strident reversal and dismantling of these constraints, is an occasion for us to reflect on the longer trajectory of the more chronic forms of alienation in modern societies.

What this particular reversal of the last thirty does is only bring to *contemporary* light a remarkable and *longstanding* fact of political modernity, the fact that as soon as the Enlightenment articulated its two great ideals of liberty and equality, it immediately developed them in theoretical terms that put them in a permanent and irresolvable tension with one another. The cold war was just a crude and highly visible symptom of this tension, with each side accusing the other of either pursuing liberty at the cost of equality or vice versa. The more subtle form of the tension is the one I mentioned above, the one that occurs within societies committed to liberty, the tension that is symptomatic in the recurring efforts in the last seven decades in these societies (through the electoral victories of social democratic parties) to put constraints on capital but which are then also recurringly overthrown because of a seemingly long term refusal on the part of the tendency of capital to tolerate such constraints on it for anything but short periods when crises seem to demand them (on roughly Keynesian grounds). Populisms of the sort we are witnessing I believe will recur cyclically in those periods when societies feel the effects of this recurrent undermining of social democratic constraints and will remain with us in this cyclical form until we find a way of transcending this tension between our commitments to liberty and equality. And I don't believe that we can transcend that tension while we

accept the theoretical frameworks of modernity within which these two notions have been developed.

How we might do so, how we might reframe these ideals, I believe would have to amount to something like a paradigm shift in political theory since I don't believe social democracy itself and the constraints it offers are fundamental enough to possess the ability to reorient the ideals. In fact, if what I've been saying is right, the occasionally recurrent return of social democracy, honorable though it is when it is sincerely pursued (which is not always), is deep down itself a symptom of the recurring tension between liberty and equality. I myself don't believe that these ceaseless trade off relations between liberty and equality can be halted without making the ideal of an unalienated life more central even than liberty and equality and re-casting liberty and equality as merely necessary conditions for this more primitive, less abstract, and more human ideal. But these more basic questions about the theoretical reconfiguration of our fundamental ideals must remain the topic for another occasion.

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