

Populism as a Spectre of Democracy: A Response to Canovan

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The literature on populism used to depict the phenomenon as an alternative to the standard path from traditional to modern society; as a way to enfranchise the underclass; or as an anomaly vis-à-vis class politics and liberal institutions. More recently, the debate has shifted into something of a terra incognita as a result of the growing interest in the connection between populism and democratic politics. One of the more intriguing contributions to this debate is an article by Margaret Canovan, if only because it makes this unknown territory less confusing. Her argument draws from Michael Oakeshott's claim that political modernity is characterised by the interplay of two distinct styles – the politics of *faith* and the politics of *scepticism*. She renames them the *redemptive* and *pragmatic* faces of democracy and suggests that populism arises in the gap between them. This establishes a relation of interiority between populism and democracy. The former will follow democracy like a shadow. At times, however, the theoretical status of the gap is somewhat uncertain, as it seems more appropriate for thinking politics (particularly radical politics) in general. The political valence of the shadow could also be specified further to show the undecidability between the democratic aspect of the phenomenon and its possible ominous tones. This paper looks into this in some detail to engage in a friendly interrogation of Canovan's claims.

Populism and Democracy

Peter Worsley provided us with one of the first intelligent proposals on how to link populism and democracy (1969). He took his cue from the double heading of populism suggested by Edward Shils – the supremacy of the will of the people and the direct relationship between the people and the government (Worsley, 1969, p. 244). From this, Worsley extracted two consequences. One is that these notions apply to a wide variety of situations, which is why he argued that we should regard populism as an emphasis, 'a dimension of political culture in general, not simply as a particular kind of overall ideological system or type of organization' (p. 245). This was his way of saying that populism cannot claim any conceptual purity for itself or that the 'as such' of populism is always already contaminated and cannot be determined outside a context. The other consequence is that we can plot the contact between the people and the leadership on a continuum that goes from the total non-involvement of the masses at one end of the spectrum to the anarchist ideal self-regulating commune at the other (p. 245). Worsley used this scale to distinguish right from left, although it seems more apt as a criterion to differentiate elitist and participatory politics. Having said this, he also identified the limits of an argument that rests solely on the directness of the link between leaders and masses, for in complex societies this must necessarily be a symbolic or a mystifying directness. That is why he added an important modifier: populism refers not only to this link, but also to forms of 'direct' participation in general, be they genuine or

spurious, in the sense of the involvement of people in governing their own lives, however ineffective this may turn out to be (p. 246).

The reference to participation is crucial for Worsley's argument. He disputed Lipset's conception of the good society as one where citizens can choose among contenders for political office, for he argued, quite correctly, that such a view reduces democracy to the institutionalisation of opposition and to the periodic change of government. In other words, he questioned the enclosure of democracy in its liberal format. By focusing on participation, he broadened the field of what we normally understand as democracy. If the latter is a way of putting into practice the supremacy of the will of the people, then democracy 'has always involved a great deal more than the ins-and-outs of parliamentarianism' (1969, p. 246). He concluded that populism is neither democratic nor anti-democratic in itself – fascists, as well as egalitarian and reform movements, can claim to represent the people and appeal to direct forms of participation – but at least it is compatible with democracy (p. 247).

This compatibility is what interests me. The recent literature follows this line of reasoning by focusing on the theoretical dimension of democratic politics. Jack Hayward saw populism as a response to the perceived shortcomings of democratic elitism (1996). Critics have said that, in the case of the EU, elites no longer act in the public interest and corruption at the highest levels discredits them (Hayward, 1996, p. 10). The continuing decline of mass parties and the ability of elite-oriented organisations to mobilise the public open up a space for the new politics of social movements and challenger parties (pp. 21–2). This failure of the mediating role of impersonal elites, Hayward said, is an open invitation for populist and other groups to step in to counteract the democratic deficit in the EU – even more so, given that their methods of political action include the use of direct action, which broadens the participatory horizon of citizens beyond that of infrequent voters choosing among contending parties (p. 23). He concluded by saying that no matter how unsavoury populism may be for some, representative democracy must coexist with the countervailing forces of elitism and populism (p. 27).

Margaret Canovan developed a similar view; although instead of speaking of elitism and populism, she referred to the pragmatic and redemptive faces of democracy. Like other authors who have written on this subject, she understood populism 'as an appeal to "the people" against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society' (1999, p. 3). She specified what she meant by this. First, like new social movements, the anti-system mobilisation of populism often runs against parties; but unlike the former, populists direct their challenge to both the political and economic establishments *and* elite values of the type held by opinion-formers in the academy and the media. Second, a recognised authority grants legitimacy to this revolt against the power structures, for populists claim to speak for the people; the style of this speech is characterised by the use of a direct language and by the proposal of equally simple and direct political solutions to the problems of ordinary people. Finally, there is a certain populist mood that involves the 'revivalist flavour of a movement powered by enthusiasm' and a tendency to focus emotions on a charismatic leader (pp. 3–6).

After fleshing out the basic coordinates of the populist 'reaction against politics-as-usual', Canovan left aside the discussion of the ideology or the policy content and proceeded, like Hayward, to examine populism in its relation to democracy. Her basic claim derives from Michael Oakeshott's distinction between two styles that have characterised European politics throughout modernity (1996). One is the politics of *faith*, the belief in the possibility of achieving perfection through human effort, or salvation without the intervention of divine providence (pp. 22–3). It is a style characterised by 'an absence of scruple, a suspicion that formality in government and the insistence on the letter of the law will hinder the enterprise' (p. 56). Jacobinism would exemplify this. The other style is the politics of *scepticism*, which reckons that governments can do little more than keep the peace and improve 'the system of rights and duties and the concomitant system of means of redress, which together compose the superficial order' (p. 34). For Oakeshott, neither style can exist in its purity, or alone, for they are poles of a single activity and not mere alternative opposites (p. 91). Whenever they do appear on their own, they become their own nemesis – self-destructive (pp. 92, 127). The tension between them explains the deep ambiguity of our political vocabulary (pp. 18, 118), whose terms are continually being claimed by the opposing styles, and it also accounts for the contingency of all political arrangements, as these are the outcome of the shifting fortunes of each style.

Building on this distinction, but renaming its constitutive poles *redemptive* and *pragmatic*, Canovan suggested that we can 'understand modern democracy (idea and phenomenon) as a point of intersection between redemptive and pragmatic sides of politics', and that between these two faces 'lies a gap in which populism is liable to appear' (1999, p. 9). She mentioned three specific tensions that reveal this gap. First, pragmatists see democracy as a way of handling conflicts without appealing to repression or degenerating into civil war; the set of electoral institutions and practices of representative democracy provide the key mechanisms for this (p. 11). However, democracy also has a more glorious face related to secular redemption, 'the promise of a better world through action by the sovereign people' (p. 12). For Canovan, 'when too great a gap opens up between haloed democracy and the grubby business of politics, populists tend to move on to the vacant territory, promising in place of the dirty world of party manoeuvring the shining ideal of democracy renewed' (p. 12). I take this emphasis on 'renewal' to mean either a reform or a reinstitution of the existing order, be it in terms of its social, political or economic dimensions. Second, the gap between the promise of power to the people – understood as a capacity to exercise some control over major issues that affect our lives – and the actual performance of existing democracies on issues like participation and the responsiveness of elected representatives is the source of another tension that functions as a breeding ground for populist demands (p. 12). Finally, populism exploits the tension between 'democratic institutions and the alienation to which they inevitably give rise' – between, on the one hand, the romanticism of a spontaneous expression of the will of the people and, on the other, the institutions and professional expertise that are required to mediate that will (p. 13). Populist movements, she said, react against this by empowering charismatic leaders who promise to break with the routine of bureaucratic institutions and to turn politics into a more personal experience (p. 14). In all these

cases, the populist intervention invokes the redemptive face of democracy as a corrective of the excesses brought about by pragmatism.

The Gap and the Elusive Phenomenon

The theoretical core of Canovan's contribution is thus the claim that the gap wherein populism emerges revolves around a certain non-coincidence of the two faces of democracy. Populism arises as a response to an asymmetry brought about by an excess (of pragmatism) and a deficit (of redemption). How are we to assess the conceptual status of this gap or in-between? What is the theoretical import of the spacing between the two faces of democratic politics?

These questions presents us with at least two options. One is to conceive of the gap as an outcome of a poor balance between pragmatism and redemption, and therefore claim that it is possible (and perhaps even necessary) to arrive to some sort of correct combination, either through patient pursuit or by feat of institutional engineering. This would be something of an Aristotelian solution. Just as the good constitution consists of the right mixture of monarchic, aristocratic and constitutional or democratic components, the good modern polity is one that manages to balance pragmatism and redemption in a way that cancels out the tension between them. The problem is that then we have to dismiss populism beforehand, for there would be no gap left for it to appear. It would turn out to be an accident or a disturbance exorcised by fiat with the right mix.

At first sight, Canovan seems to have endorsed this option when she said that populists thrive when the gap between the two faces of democracy widens, for this suggests, by implication, that if the gap were sufficiently narrow, the space for the populist appeal would shrink accordingly. Similarly, there would be an Aristotelian vein in Oakeshott too, at least according to the editor's introduction to his book, which highlights the pursuit of a correct balance between the opposite tendencies of faith and scepticism (1996, p. x). On closer scrutiny, both authors explicitly avoid such a solution. In his concluding remarks, Oakeshott did propose the principle of the mean point between the two poles of modern politics, but he compared his idea of the right balance to a shifting equilibrium of the type sought by the 'trimmer', 'one who disposes his weight so as to keep the ship upon an even keel' (p. 123). That is why he described this mean point as a middle region of movement and not as a central point of repose (p. 121). This means that political settings have nothing to do with the static beauty of geometric forms and refer instead to contingent arrangements resulting from variable mixes between the two political styles of modernity. Moreover, he spoke of a surprising partnership between the politics of faith and the politics of scepticism. These styles of government also form a unity in their mutual attraction and repulsion. He described this relationship as a *concordia discors* or harmony in discord (pp. 90, 118), an oxymoron that is not very different from Kant's celebrated allusion to the 'unsocial sociability' characteristic of humankind. There is not a trace of Aristotelian reasoning here. Likewise, for Canovan, both pragmatism and redemption are *necessary* for the working of democracy and, if anything, each acts as an endless corrective for the other; they are, she said, 'a pair of squabbling Siamese twins, inescapably linked, so that it is an illusion to suppose that we can have one without the other' (1999, p. 10).

Having established that the gap is not the result of a poor mix, and therefore cannot be assimilated to a void that could and should be filled, we can move on to the second option, one that conceives of it as a matter of structural bad timing. The meeting of pragmatism and redemption will always come too early or too late, and therefore the tension generated by the excess or the deficit of one or the other – and by the corrective role of one over the other – will be played out indefinitely. In this interpretation, the question is no longer how or if the two faces might come together; it is about the actual spacing between them, a spacing that confirms that their non-coincidence is a constitutive, not an accidental, feature of modern politics. For Canovan, as for Oakeshott, democratic politics *requires* this in-between if both complacency and romanticism are to be held in check. However, if the gap is a structural feature, there is no reason to think that it will father only populist offspring. Many other movements could arise there too, so instead of being the condition of possibility of populism it turns out to be the space of appearance of the impulse of political reform in general. Canovan raised this point toward the end of her essay when she said that ‘populism is not the only kind of radicalism that flourishes in this gap’; the other kind she was referring to is the theory and the practice of participatory democracy that came along with the new social movements of the 1960s (1999, pp. 14–15).

This is not a minor afterthought, for it poses a dilemma that touches on the specificity of the subject we are examining. On the one hand, Canovan re-elaborated Oakeshott’s distinction between the two faces of modern politics in order to account for the populist experience in contemporary democracies. The virtue of her argument resides in the creative way in which she grafted these two styles into a different setting and proposed the gap between them as a space for the emergence of populism. On the other hand, this argument goes beyond populism as it addresses the broader issue of radical democratic politics – or, more precisely, of radical *politics* in general, democratic or otherwise, for Oakeshott reminded us time and again that these styles were born with modern politics and have shaped its fortunes for the past 500 years. As already mentioned, this means that the gap that ensues from the constitutive spacing between pragmatism and redemption – and in particular, the gap resulting from the excess of the former over the latter – accounts for the emergence of the populist appeal, but also for the appearance of any movement or coalition seeking to enhance the redemptive side of politics. In brief, this remarkable theoretical insight of Canovan tells us a lot about how to proceed with the study of the actual practice of politics, which can never be reduced to a disenchanted pragmatism stripped of all messianic or redemptive elements, but it also limits the analytic import of the gap as a means to assess the populist phenomenon in its ‘as such’.

We could try to specify this by other means. Ernesto Laclau did so by fiat of conceptual permutation, for he maintained that populism and politics are interchangeable terms (2002). He was quite clear about this: ‘If populism consists in postulating a radical alternative within the communitarian space, a choice in the crossroads on which the future of a given society hinges, does not populism become synonymous with politics? The answer can only be affirmative’ (2002). I can see the appeal of this argument, as it interpellates those like myself, who share the intuition that all politics, democratic or not, has a populist streak. Yet it is also

disconcerting, for it seeks to specify the conceptual valence of populism by endowing it with the attributes of the political. I am reticent to endorse a conceptual inflation, the use of two concepts to designate a radical interruption of communitarian space, or to go along with the confusion resulting from populism and politics morphing into one another. This does not mean that we should aim for Cartesian clarity. Any reference to a strict 'as such' of concepts is tricky, especially if we accept Oakeshott's argument about the deep ambiguity of our political lexicon. Language is the site of a tug of war between faith and scepticism, with each style staking its own claims on the various terms of our vocabulary. Consequently, a degree of linguistic slippage and outright polemic is inevitable. Populism, like any other concept, is caught in the tension between these two styles, inevitably contaminated by its relation to other terms in our political vocabulary. If we accept this, then the very possibility of any 'as such' is undermined from the outset.

Spectral Recurrences

Can we disambiguate populism further while maintaining the reference to the squabbling Siamese twins of pragmatism and redemption? A closer look at the second theme in Canovan's argument (populism as the shadow of democracy) might shed some light on this issue. What does the metaphor tell us about the relation between populism and democracy? Is the populist shadow a fault, an accident, a recurrence or a fixture of modern democracy? The impact of the metaphor rests mostly on what it evokes in the reader. At first, she spoke of populism as the shadow cast by democracy (1999, p. 3). The emphasis falls on the 'by', as in 'cast *by* democracy', which of course raises the questions of where this shadow is cast, and what it would consist of. One possibility is to understand the shadow as an indicator of a democratic glitch. Liberals are not particularly happy with the populist offhanded interpretation of democratic rules and institutional arrangements, so maybe we would have to speak of a shadow cast on the liberal component of modern democracies. Canovan, however, warned us against the simplistic view of an illiberal populism that nonetheless incarnates the democratic side of liberal democracy (p. 8), for that would make populism something of an *über*-democratic experience. This is a reasonable caveat, yet she did mention the populist distrust of institutional mediations like established political parties or the intricacies of a legislative process, both of which require experts and professional politicians instead of the 'common man' of the populist interpellation. If we focus on these typically liberal aspects of democracy, populism would appear to be a glitch or a shadow *cast by* democracy – more precisely, one cast by the actual functioning of democratic politics, either by an excess of pragmatism that invites its redemptive Siamese twin to step in as a corrective, or by a systemic overload caused by participation left unchecked and running amok.

However, a shadow is not an accident that can occur or not. Leaving aside the special occasions of night and high noon (when shadows disappear) and the presumed although unconfirmed possibility of the living dead (who have none), a shadow is, by definition, that which will accompany a body. If populism is a shadow of democracy, it will follow it always as a possibility – and probably as something more than a possibility, since no one can choose whether or not to have a shadow.

This seems to be the point Hayward made: in the European polity, populism co-exists with representative democracy. Perhaps that is why, later on, Canovan spoke not of a shadow cast by democracy but of a 'populist mobilization that *follows democracy* like a shadow' (1999, p. 7, emphasis added). Here, the metaphor undergoes a subtle connotative shift – it confirms that populism cannot be assimilated to a malfunction and that while populism is not equivalent to democracy, as a shadow that persists it must be conceived as a possibility embedded in the very practice of democracy.

The question is to determine how embedded this possibility is, and what it entails, for once we have allowed for a relation of interiority between populism and democracy, the semantic field of these concepts begin to overlap. The purity of frontiers is, of course, a bogus notion, but it seems to me that the acceptance of conceptual contamination (Oakeshott's thesis about the ambiguity of our political language) should stop short of Laclau's claim that populism and politics are interchangeable. On the one hand, the spacing created by the squabbling Siamese twins of redemption and pragmatism is a distinctive trait of modern politics and a condition of possibility for the emergence of reform movements in general; and on the other, the reference to the shadow as something that *follows* democracy turns populism into an internal possibility of democracy. Either way, the difficulty I mentioned earlier reappears, for the reflection on the populist experience overlaps with an argument that seems more appropriate to describe the vicissitudes of modern politics.

Perhaps (and I must underline the exploratory nature of this 'perhaps') we can disambiguate the intuition concerning the interface between the gap and the shadow by modifying the status of the latter and grafting on to it additional features. This will allow us to fine-tune the conceptual valence of the populist phenomenon. Following Derrida (1994), who popularised the discussion of spectres and of spectral logic in his reading of Marx, we might want to refer to populism as a *spectre* rather than a shadow of democracy. I am not fidgeting with language. A spectre suggests both a visitation (as in the return of Hamlet's father) and something that can haunt us (as in the spectre of communism famously depicted by Marx and Engels in the opening lines of the *Manifesto*). This double meaning is implicit in Canovan's argument concerning the shadow, but the reference to spectrality deals with the interplay between the two options explicitly; and more importantly, it addresses the undecidability that is inbuilt into populism, for it can be something that both accompanies democracy and haunts it.

We can see this spectrality at work in three modes of appearance of populism, all of them connected with democratic politics. Each moves the phenomenon a notch further in the interval separating a visitation and a more threatening haunting. One is that populism may be a particular mode of representation that is compatible with, but not identical to, the liberal-democratic understanding of representative government. This mode of representation has become more salient in today's media-enhanced political performances. Manin spoke of the metamorphoses of representation and claimed that the older party democracy is being replaced by what he called 'audience democracy' (1997). Two major developments characterise the latter. First, political marketing and the spread of the mass media have modified the weight of party activists and bureaucrats. Today, he said, political leaders

can use radio and television to bypass party machineries and establish a direct relation with the electorate (1997, p. 220). This provides them with personal legitimacy that is relatively independent of that cast by political institutions and opens up a space for both mavericks and career politicians to thrive in the public stage. This development seems attuned to the populist claim of a direct appeal to the people and its fascination with leaders who enjoy supra-partisan legitimacy. The second development mentioned by Manin is that, in a world of growing complexity, no elected official is expected to fulfil all their electoral promises because the speed of change requires a capacity to adjust to circumstances. That is why he said that maybe audience democracy calls for us to reconsider what Locke called 'prerogative' – the capacity of making decisions in the absence of a standing rule or norm (p. 221). People today vote for those they can *trust* to make decisions in a changing world (pp. 222, 226). Once again, I see here a fertile ground for the populist tradition of strong leaders, only that these no longer appear as exceptions in a more stable institutional framework but instead become a functional component of audience democracy.

While this notion is fully compatible with the idea of populism as a spectral companion of democratic politics, the second one refers to populism as a mode of participation that departs from the etiquette of political salons without apologising for its brashness. The archetypical image of its followers is that of excited football fans unconcerned with the ritualised table manners of public life. Whether as a reaction against 'politics as usual' or as a response to the failures of elitist democracy, populism would designate a form of intervention that has the potential to both disturb and renew the political process without necessarily stepping outside the institutional settings of democracy. Its politics unfolds in the rougher edges of the liberal-democratic establishment. Here, the spectre has moved a step further from being a media-friendly fellow traveller of liberal democracy and starts to resemble a haunting presence, one that generates some degree of discomfort within mainstream politics.

A third and final manifestation of populism reveals the more ominous potential of the metaphor of the shadow. Here, the spectre no longer refers to a visitation but to a phenomenon that comes to haunt political democracy and to endanger the very framework in which it can function. For example, the distrust for institutional procedures and the intricacies of the legislative process – which Oakeshott identified as one of the traits of the politics of faith – might give way to a discretionary adherence to the rule of law that slips all too easily into authoritarian practices. When in office, this multiplies conflicts with the judiciary and other state powers; when in opposition, it blurs the line separating the multitude in action from mob rule. Right-wing populists in Europe and elsewhere do this in the name of the people without always losing legitimacy or popular support. With their penchant for demagogic claims, they invoke the trope of corrupt or self-serving elites that have lost touch with the people, or they prey on people's fears by claiming that stricter policing and immigration controls will solve economic and social problems. This, of course, requires a strong and decisive government, which is often an alibi for authoritarian practices. Populists can get away with undemocratic behaviour as long as their actions are perceived to represent the will of the people. This brings into play a quasi-Hobbesian theory of political obligation. The classical exchange

of obedience for protection turns into a passionate allegiance to a political grouping in exchange for jobs and security or the promise to provide them once in office. Moreover, the centrality of the leaders and their direct rapport with the 'common man' transform them into something akin to infallible sovereigns, in that their decisions are unquestionable because they are theirs. The populist mode of representation and its peculiarly brash style of political participation then cease to be internal moments of the democratic process and turn into its menacing underside.

In brief, then, the emphasis I have placed on the spectral relation between populism and democracy is not an alternative to Canovan's take on populism but a way of supplementing it. The undecidability between the visitation and the haunting allows for several modes of appearance of the phenomenon. As something of an internal periphery of democratic politics, populism can be a dimension of representation and a mode of participation lodged in the rougher edges of democracy, but also something more disturbing, as it can thrive in political democracies while it morphs into democracy's nemesis.

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