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Some notes on 'Populism'

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Abstract

The article criticizes the idea that we can find the 'real meaning' of populism and focuses instead on six psychological attitudes and political programmes that the term 'populism' can invoke: Lake Wobegon populism, short-termism, Trumpism, the attraction of simple solutions, responses to inequality, and direct democracy. While conceptually distinct, these are often found together and can reinforce each other.

Keywords

democracy, globalization, Marx, populism, Tocqueville

The present article is a speculative 'think-piece'. I claim no expertise on populism and rely on what I have learned from newspapers and a very selective reading of the scholarly literature.

On this question, conceptual, theoretical and factual issues merge to make the task both interesting and difficult. I shall begin by making two negative points.

The first concerns the meaning of 'populism'. The word has been used with many meanings. I shall discuss some of them. Here, I shall only make a simple point. There is no correct definition of populism, since definitions can never be true or false. (That is why I use quotation marks in the title.) Those who write about populism, capitalism, democracy and other complex social phenomena sometimes give the impression that one can send out a kind of conceptual probe to discover their 'true meaning', just as one can send out a space ship to show us the hidden face of the moon. One writer may, for instance, criticize another for having 'misunderstood' populism. Such essentialist practices are common but meaningless. Everyone is entitled to their own definition, provided they stick to it consistently and, for ease of communication, do not deviate too much from common usage. We should judge them not by their choice of definition but by the (upstream or downstream) causal claims or normative claims they make about the object they have defined.

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The second negative point is related to the idea of *trust* or lack thereof. We often read that popular unrest, whether expressed in the streets or in the polls, is due to lack of trust in the governing elites. Virtually without exceptions, the authors of such statements as well as scholars reporting the answers to surveys, do not specify whether they refer to trust in competence or trust in honesty or, as Bentham said, in ability or virtue. (He also added energy as a third desideratum.) When dealing with a garage mechanic or a surgeon, we may distrust their ability to fix our problem or their disposition to do so without overcharging us (or, as Bentham would have added, without making us wait too long).[1] Distrust of politicians or of institutions such as parliament, the army, the police or the judiciary can also take either form. In many cases, the basis for distrust is a belief that the elites are corrupt or at the very least motivated only by their self-interest. Alternatively, the distrust may rest on a belief that institutions are incompetent, often because of rigid institutions that block reforms. In the United States, for instance, there are no fewer than five counter-majoritarian veto points that can block decisions by the House of Representatives: the Senate, the 60% majority requirement in the Senate, the presidential veto, judicial review and the 'Hastert rule' that enables the majority of the majority to prevent bills from coming to a floor vote. For distrust to have any explanatory purchase, one has to specify which form one has in mind. Of course, the two forms can coexist. When they do, incompetence may temper the damage caused by dishonesty.

I shall now sketch six of the many possible definitions of populism. The typology is not very robust and presented only as a step in organizing our thinking.

A first form of populism is what we might call Lake Wobegon populism. In that wonderful place, as we know, all children are above the average. Similarly, in Lake Wobegon, politicians want to spend like a left-wing party and tax like a right-wing party.[2] In France, the Poujade movement of the 1950s had some of this flavour. Recently, Emmanuel Macron challenged the Yellow Vests by asking them to spell out which social services should be discarded if taxes were to be cut. Conversely, the frequent populist calls for higher taxes on the rich often assume that one can redistribute income without affecting the amount to be redistributed (see below). These forms of populism are based on wishful thinking, whether they violate the laws of arithmetic or of economic causality. The other forms of populism that I shall discuss are often tainted, to varying degrees, by Lake Wobegon populism.

A second form of populism can defined by the impact of a high rate of time discounting. When populist leaders, or leaders appealing to populist sentiments, advocate confiscatory taxes, they are not necessarily unaware of the risk that in doing so they may kill the goose that is laying the golden eggs. They may simply not care very much about the future.

Many democracies are populist in this sense, for two distinct reasons. On the one hand, if politicians believe they will be punished or rewarded for what happens on their watch, the system of periodical elections will induce short-termism. Moreover, in many modern governments, the actual and expected turnover of ministers is so high that their time horizon is truncated over and above the normal shortening effect produced by the electoral cycle.[3] On the other hand, voters may elect politicians who cater to their wish for immediate gratification. More subtly, they may elect politicians who respond to their hyperbolic discounting of the future.[4] Echoing Saint-Augustin, they may wish for climate change abatement, beginning in 10 years. When the 10-year date approaches, the

measures are delayed for another 10 years. Casual newspaper reading suggests that both national and international programmes to reduce global warming are being undermined by this tendency.

Short-termism can have three distinct consequences.

First, voters as well as politicians may not be able to resist the temptation to raid funds that have been set aside for future generations. Countries with a large sovereign fund are permanently exposed to this temptation. Norway constitutes a famous exception. Here, an informal rule with broad political support has so far prevented such raids. When introduced in 2001, the rule stipulated that a maximum of 4% of the fund should be allocated to the yearly government budget. When the maximum was set to 3% in 2017, all parties in parliament voted for the change except for the right-wing Progress Party, often labelled populist. As the average return on the fund has been around 5%, governments have not been eating the seed grain. Other countries, for instance Venezuela, have shown less self-restraint.

Second, voters may not want to impose temporary sufferings on themselves, even if taking one step backward today would enable them to take two steps forward tomorrow. Investments in infrastructure funded by higher taxes is an example.

Third, voters may be reluctant to take one step backward today even if the alternative is to take several steps backward at some later date. The paradigmatic case is the reluctance of governments to take the necessary measures to limit climate change. Hence we can reverse the common dictum that democracy is under threat, and affirm that democracy *is* the threat, at least in its short-termist populist form.

The problem is that the populist form seems to be the normal one. A short time horizon is a built-in tendency in democracies, with no robust institutional countertendencies. Even if Norway were to write the 3% maximum into its constitution and make amendment very difficult, I believe that the predictable and disastrous short-term consequences of climate change would create an irresistible pressure to raid the fund. *Necessitas non habet legem*.

One might argue therefore, as some do, that we should look to dictatorial forms of government to save the planet. I do not agree. Even dictators need to keep their subjects reasonably happy in the short run, to avoid social unrest that might escalate into civil war. We often read, for instance, that economic growth is the main source of legitimacy for the Chinese regime.

I shall now define a third form of populism, which we may call Trumpism. To capture it in a nutshell, I shall cite one of my colleagues at Columbia University, who said in a post-mortem seminar after Trump was elected that it was 'the unleashing of the beast'. I interpret him as saying that there had been for a long time a latent demand for someone like Trump, but that until 2016 there was no supply to satisfy the demand.[5] The substantive issue turns obviously on the meaning of 'the beast' and 'someone like Trump'. The jury is still out on the exact psychological mix of Trump's electorate, but I conjecture that it involved bigotry, ignorance, sexism, racism, xenophobia, fear and resentment. The existence of voters with this profile did not come as a surprise, but what surprised my colleague and many others was that they apparently made up 30% of the electorate rather than, say, 10%. Whereas Trump's success in the Southern states was anticipated, his victory in key Midwestern states was not.

I do not claim that Trump matched this profile perfectly. In fact, Trump's inner thoughts, if he has any, remain mysterious. He won because his many absurd and extravagant statements allowed the voters to express *their* inner thoughts without being ashamed. In France, one often refers to the extreme right as '*la droite décomplexée*', the uninhibited right. In the United States, too, it seems that many voters lost their inhibitions through snowballing primaries that transformed latent or covert Trumpists into overt ones.

Once again, this is conjecture. To better understand the motivational mix, we shall have to await the accumulation of fine-grained local studies. I shall make a few remarks, however, that are less speculative.

Among the seven possible motives of Trump voters that I listed, *fear* and *resentment* stand out because they are, to some extent, rooted in facts.

The fear of becoming a victim of globalization or of automation is not irrational, although the tendency to privilege the first factor may well be.[6] Also, it seems that when globalization takes the form of immigration, latent prejudices against immigrants are activated.

Resentment against the elite is a reaction to the *contempt* expressed by the elite. Barack Obama's referred to working-class voters in the South as people who 'cling to guns and religion', and Hilary Clinton's remark than one could 'put half of Trump's supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables'. By all accounts, these comments generated intense resentment. In my opinion, they were justified, but expressing them was extremely unwise.

Trumpist populism also exists, in attenuated form, in other countries. The success of the Swedish Democrats is arguably due to the activation of long-standing prejudices. In that country, the longstanding but latent demand for anti-immigration policies was satisfied by politicians who to an unusual extent share the prejudices of their voters. 'A large fraction of [the Swedish Democrats] politicians can through hard-changing personal traits credibly commit to representing disgruntled segments of the electorate'.[7] In Norway, the most popular politician in the Progress Party owes her standing to Trump-like statements about her political opponents. In France, Jean-Marie le Pen was also admired by many for his uninhibited frankness, which his daughter has tried to shed to become (somewhat) *salonfähig*. The recent elections in Australia also showed Trumpist populism.

In sum, one can define Trumpist populism by the *disinhibition* of the verbal and electoral expression of latent prejudices. As La Rochefoucauld wrote, 'We imitate good actions through emulation, and bad ones through the malignity of our nature which shame restrains and example liberates'.

A fourth definition of populism can be stated in terms of the attractiveness of simple solutions. As HL Mencken said, 'For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong'. The French have an expression for this trust in simple solutions, 'yaqua', shorthand for 'il n'y a qu'à . . . ' followed by some simple prescription. It can be rendered as 'All you have to do is . . . ', as in 'To solve the problem of congestion all you have to do is build more highways'. As experience shows, such proposals fail because the new highways attract more drivers. Agents adapt to reforms in ways that may undermine or destroy their efficacy.

Politicians are usually, but not always, aware of this fact. When they are and for that reason abstain from implementing solutions that on their face seem compelling, the public space is open for demagogues. As I noted earlier, the 'yaqua' proposal to solve any given problem by taxing the rich ignores that if it is implemented there may be less income to tax.

Such ignorance of causal relations differs from ignorance about fact. The latter allows demagogues to be elected on a promise to achieve huge savings and tax rebates by eliminating foreign aid, in spite of the very small role this expenditure actually plays in the overall budget of the government. On this issue, demagogues can also of course appeal to prejudices, but it may be sufficient to exploit the documented cognitive deficiencies of the public.[8] In the example of foreign aid, they can play on both registers.

Fifth, we can define populism as the political response to some real or perceived problems that the main parties for one reason or another tend to ignore. The problems include poverty, inequality, and insecurity.

Consider first the losers from globalization. The losers are those who earn less after a given reform, the winners those who earn more. Thus losers are defined by comparison to their pre-reform income, not by comparison to the winners. When I refer to the losers as poor, it is always relative their pre-reform income and not in the sense, say, of earning less than half the median income.

The conundrum that faces the world community today is that each country on average gains from free trade, while in each country some occupational or geographical groups loses from the process. In many Western countries, a narrative has been created in which free trade – mobility across borders of labour, capital, goods, and services – is blamed for a dramatic fall in jobs and wages. The narrative is true in part, but technological change is arguably more important. Yet compared to the protests against free trade, there are few contemporary Luddists claiming for a halt to automation. This asymmetry arises because the events we observe – job loss or wage loss – do not have their causes written on their face, and – I conjecture – because in the face of harmful events the human mind naturally seeks causes that are reversible.

Because each country on average gains from free trade, it is possible in principle to fully compensate the losers. In practice, however, several problems arise.

First, as I have noted, redistribution via tax on income has important incentive effects that may reduce the amount that can be transferred. In other words, the transfer bucket is leaky. In theory, one could overcome this problem by using a lump-sum transfer that is determined by the ability, or potential performance, of the winners rather than by their actual performance. In practice, lump-sum transfers are rarely used, if only because they, too, would create a leak in the transfer bucket. The verification of potential performance would require a huge and costly bureaucracy, to be funded from the tax before the transfer. Whereas one can induce owners of virgin land to cultivate it by taxing them according to its observable productive potential, information about personal skills is asymmetrical. In addition, a lump-sum transfer might force a talented person to engage in a profession she does not want take up or induce her to fake the ability tests.

In practice, therefore, compensation of the losers will require an economy that is sufficiently productive to absorb the efficiency losses from redistribution. Even in that case, however, a more intangible harm might arise, namely the loss of self-respect

caused by the losers' perception that they are no longer, or not fully, contributing to the economy. The belief that workers want jobs, and not just hand-outs, is one of the factors motivating the efforts to find or create jobs for the unemployed.

Needless to say, the aim of preserving self-respect cannot be achieved by schemes of make-believe work, as was attempted in France when François Hollande created numerous but ephemeral '*emplois bidon*'. The public works in the United States under the Great Depression provide a better model. Although these were not triggered by consumer demand, they met a public need. We can still admire the many splendid public buildings with durable esthetic value that were constructed in this period.

I mentioned how the winners might make the transfer bucket leak by choosing to work less when they are taxed more. In addition, the winners may create obstacles to transfers by political means. That is, in addition to being leaky the bucket may not be very full in the first place. If the winners use their wealth to obtain political power, they can then use the power to limit the transfers. In the United States, they do so by using lobbyists who scrutinize the congressional votes of the candidate who owes his or her election to their employer. The transparency that was supposed to enable voters to hold their delegates accountable has become the tool of special interests.[9] Under these circumstances, a few rich winners can and do block transfers to the numerous losers. The rich can also achieve the same effect indirectly, by enacting legislation designed to undermine the bargaining power of workers and the formation of trade unions. In this way, the rich can prevent the workers from preventing losses from globalization, since strong unions can resist trade agreements that have sharp distributive impacts.

The rationale for compensating the losers is social justice. If their wage or job loss occurs by sheer bad luck, through no fault of their own, social justice requires that their losses be spread evenly, so that the winners gain less than they would otherwise do. Windfall gains can be used to compensate windfall losses. At the same time, losers cannot expect to be compensated fully if, through a fault of their own, they fail to take steps that could alleviate their situation. This statement may seem too harsh. It may not seem unreasonable to subsidize, as do many countries in one form of another, occupational or geographical stability to prevent the pains of relocation. If such subsidies are made across the board, however, they are a recipe for sclerosis. If made selectively, they usually reflect special interests.

Consider next the problem of increased inequality. Even winners from globalization might gain less than others and thus suffer relative deprivation. By definition, this is also the fate of the losers. This case poses both a normative and a behavioural issue.

From a normative perspective, does social justice require us to compensate the subset of winners, who, by no fault of their own, gain less than other winners? I believe that Theory says Yes, while Intuition says No. Intuition can rely on the idea that since the members of that subset have not been harmed by the reform in question, they have no grounds for complaining. Faced with the objection that the greater success of others makes them feel worse off, Intuition would dismiss it as based on a form of envy that, in general, does not justify compensation. The Theory of luck egalitarianism might also dismiss that objection, but nevertheless not accept the harm criterion as the only ground for compensation. Although we know from prospect theory that people suffer actual harm more vividly than a comparable welfare foregone, Theory would dismiss this fact as an irrelevant quirk of the mind. I leave this question open for discussion.

From a behavioural perspective, we can ask whether the subset of winners who are also relative losers tend to be motivated by their inferiority to demand compensation. Whereas material poverty is experienced directly, the perception of inequality rests on beliefs – true or false – about what other people earn. Also, the impact of inequality depends on inequality-aversion, envy or other social preferences. Although the impact of poverty can be mediated by what other people *do*, as when not being able to wear shoes is felt as more painful when most others do (Adam Smith's example), this fact is unrelated to what others *earn*. Income inequality may not have an impact at all: even if I know that my neighbour earns more than I do, I might not care. The social planner might care, but that is a different matter. People do not rebel or vote for radical parties merely because the social planner is subject to inequality-aversion.[10]

I do not know whether, in general, people are motivated by poverty or by inequality, or how these interact when both exist. As a substitute (and turning to a field where I do have some expertise), I shall discuss how Marx and Tocqueville thought about the matter.

Although it is often assumed that Marx thought poverty would be the driving force in revolutions, as some texts seem to say, he was also attuned to the motivating force of inequality.

> A noticeable increase in wages presupposes a rapid growth of productive capital. The rapid growth of productive capital brings about an equally rapid growth of wealth, luxury, social wants, social enjoyments. Thus, although the enjoyments of the workers have risen, the social satisfaction they give has fallen [1] in comparison with the increased enjoyments of the capitalist, which are inaccessible to the worker, [2] in comparison with the state of development of society in general (*Wage Labor and Capital*).

In this passage, Marx offers first a comparison between two actual phenomena, the rapid increase in capitalist consumption and the slower increase in the consumption of the workers, and then a counterfactual comparison between the actual level of worker consumption and the level that might have been realized. The second comparison may refer to the possibility of compensation, although it's hard to tell exactly what Marx had in mind. If workers themselves make either comparison, it could motivate them to action. Even in the subset of contemporary countries where workers enjoy modest wage increases, the vertiginous rise in the increase of the rich can fuel discontent. When billionaires donated huge amounts for the restoration of Notre Dame, many French workers demanded that the sums instead be made available to improve their lot.

Tocqueville's analysis of the motivations behind the Revolution of 1848 relies on a comparison between the agent's actual and expected consumption rather than on a comparison between the consumption of the agent and that of other people. Thus, the argument goes, even when people are getting better off, they may rebel if their improvement falls short of expectations. In his *Recollections*, Tocqueville asks

> Had no one noticed that for a long time the people had continually been gaining ground and improving their condition, and that their importance, education, desires, and power were all constantly growing? Their prosperity had also increased, but not so fast. [. . .] At first the people hoped to help themselves by changing the political institutions, but after each change

> they found that their lot was not bettered, or that it had not improved fast enough to keep pace with their headlong desires.

Rather than resentment against the better off, the driving force in this case is *disappointment*.

By contrast, Tocqueville's famous account of the motivational causes of the 1789 Revolution does not rely on any kind of comparison:

> It is not always going from bad to worse that leads to revolution. What happens most often is that a people that put up with the most oppressive laws without complaint, as if they did not feel them, reject those laws violently when the burden is alleviated. [. . .] The evil that one endures patiently because it seems inevitable becomes unbearable the moment its elimination becomes conceivable. Then, every abuse that is eliminated seems only to reveal the others that remain, and makes their sting that much more painful. The ill has diminished, to be sure, but sensitivity to it has increased (*The Old Regime and the Revolution*).

The idea that oppressed individuals can be numbed by a sense of inevitability, and mobilized when they realize that change is possible, applies well beyond 18th-century France. In that case, Tocqueville argued, the realization sprang from an alleviation of their own oppression. In other cases, one oppressed group may cease to see their oppression as the natural state of affairs when they observe that it is lifted elsewhere, as in the wave of revolutions in 1848 or in the Arab Spring. In contemporary societies, reactions to globalization may owe something to this second mechanism. However, the first link in a chain reaction cannot be caused by imitation. Also, it is hard to tell how much reactions to globalization in different countries owe to chain reactions and how much to their being triggered by a common cause.

Beyond poverty and inequality, social unrest can also be motivated by insecurity. A recent study of Sweden found that about half the workforce belongs to a kind of precariat, composed of outsiders in the labour market who earn less than US$20,000 a year, and of vulnerable insiders who because of their lack of skills are more likely to lose their jobs in a downturn.[11] Although relatively few workers in the latter category actually end up losing their jobs, before the fact many more can be motivated to action by the fear that they might.[12] Insecurity and uncertainty can act as multipliers on both poverty and inequality.

At the same time, theory and empirical evidence show that legally guaranteed job security is an obstacle to job creation, since employers are reluctant to hire workers whom they cannot fire. Nevertheless, French unions have consistently, and until recently successfully, opposed the use of *contrats de durée déterminée*, the hiring of workers for a limited period. They have also successfully, until recently, imposed costly and protracted procedures for layoffs, thus protecting their members but creating an incentive for employers to outsource work rather than hire regular staff. These practices may partly be explained by the narrow outlook of trade union leaders, partly by a culture in which a secure lifetime employment is more highly valued than, say, in the United States.

Finally, there is a form of specifically political populism – direct democracy – that is devoid of specific substantive content and defined only by the goal of enabling the

citizens to hold their representatives accountable by other means than elections at fixed multi-year intervals, or even doing away with representative systems altogether. The intellectual pedigree of this idea includes Marx's writings on the Paris Commune as well as the Cultural Revolution in China.[13] The standard demands of political populism include imperative mandates, the replacement of (some) assembly decisions by referendums, participatory budgeting, full transparency of decisions, short tenure of representatives and recall of representatives at any time. All of these demands can have undesirable effects that may dominate the intended ones. Imperative mandates encourage local egoisms and block deliberation about the public interest. Referendums may be appropriate for existential decisions, for example, membership in a supra-national organization such as the European Union, but hardly for technical issues. Participatory budgeting is easily captured by special interests. Transparency enables lobbyist to monitor the votes of deputies who have received financial support for re-election. Short tenure prevents deputies from learning what they need to master the complex issues that arise in all modern societies. Instant recall invites impulsive and scandal-driven behaviour of the electorate. The question is whether the pathologies of representative democracy as we know it are more or less acceptable than these pathologies of direct democracy. My belief, for what it is worth, is that they are more acceptable. More important than my hunches, however, is the idea that in the debates over how to organize democracy, proponents of each alternative should acknowledge that we have a choice between flawed systems.

As I remarked at the outset, there can be no correct definition of populism, but some definitions can be more useful than others, in the sense of capturing more important phenomena. Lake Wobegon populism and Trumpist populism are more marginal or context-dependent than the forms of populism that seem to be rooted in permanent features of human nature. These include notably cognitive and motivational deficiencies that prevent citizens either from understanding the long-term consequences of their actions or from caring about them. The forms of populism that spring from the pathologies of globalization – poverty, inequality and insecurity – are more robust than Lake Wobegon populism and Trumpist populism, but less universal than populism based on high rates of time discounting, the search for simple solutions and the belief in the possibility of pathology-free or flawless political organization. Yet in practice, we rarely encounter one of these 'pure' forms, if we may use that phrase. Each is usually tainted to some extent by the others, making both analysis and political responses more difficult.

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Notes

1. On Bentham, see Elster (2013, chap. 3).
2. The Swedish Democrats have been accused of being committed to this policy mix (Bó et al. 2018).
3. See notably King and Crewe (2014).
4. 'Hyperbolic discounters' can be characterized as agents who reverse their relative evaluation of a small early reward and a large delayed reward as they move to the point in time when the small reward is made available to them. By contrast, the 'exponential discounters' stipulated

in most economic models never suffer preference reversals: if they prefer the large reward at one point in time, they do so at all points in time. There is massive evidence that real people are hyperbolic discounters.

5. Bó et al. (2018) offers a similar supply-demand analysis of the radical right-wing in Sweden.
6. 'While disentangling the effects of automation and globalization is difficult, most existing studies attribute the bulk of the decline in U.S. manufacturing employment to the former rather than the latter. Yet we do not see populists campaign against technology or automation. What is it that renders trade so much more salient politically?' (Rodrik 2018). I suggest an answer to this question below.
7. Bó et al. (2018).
8. Kemp (2007).
9. D'Angelo and Ranalli (2019) propose to remove the influence of lobbyists by replacing open voting in the American Congress by the secret ballot. While populists of some descriptions want to make representatives more accountable to their voters (see below), other populists might welcome reforms that make them less accountable to the funders of their re-election. To achieve both goals seems unfeasible.
10. Antràs et al. (2017) 'propose two types of adjustments to standard measures of the welfare gains from trade. On the one hand, we develop a "welfarist" correction which captures the negative impact that an increase in inequality in the distribution of disposable incomes has on the welfare of an inequality-averse social planner [. . .] On the other hand, we derive a "costly-redistribution" correction which captures the behavioral responses of agents to trade-induced shifts across marginal tax rates'. Here, I consider only the second type of adjustment.
11. Bó et al. (2018).
12. Fernandez and Rodrik (1991).
13. For the relation between these two ancestors, see Starr (1972).

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