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ABOUT POPULISM FROM A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Emanuel Tăvală[*]

Often invoked in media, political and economic discourse but rarely defined, the label *populism* has a tendency to veer toward the infamous, without ideological coverage. And this in spite of abundant specialised literature and over 50 years of tradition. The obstacle faced by all those who have tried to define populism is its ambiguity. Margaret Canovan, in her work *Populism* (New York & London, 1981)[1], already pointed out this difficulty: "the spectrum of diversity within liberalism or socialism is lower than that within populism. The main reason is that the use of the first two terms was largely determined by the adherents."

Could the shameful birth, from unknown parents, of a mutant notion, with exclusively negative reporting valences, and incapable of existing autonomously, be the original sin of populism? Semantically, populism forces synonymy with demagoguery. However, this perspective obscures a political and intellectual tradition with deep anchors in the cultural history of the last two centuries.

Practically-speaking, there is evidence (more often in recent years), of the ascendancy and consolidation of a wide-range of political movements of murky orientation on the left-right axis whose common denominator is a simplistic, Manichaean approach to reality, one

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[1] See Adam, Robert, "Populism: o tipologie", in: *Magazine 22 plus (339),* 2012.

oriented to the self-restraint of some nations, which we were convinced were definitively attached to global liberalism. The name given by the press, and not only, to this phenomenon is *populism*.[2]

When we talk about populism, we either think of a form of government that is specifically institutionalised, based on electoral democracy, or of a political current. In the first case we are dealing with a system of government based on a form of democracy, mediated as little as possible by intermediate (representative) bodies, with no system of checks and balances specific to liberal representative democracy, typically led by a charismatic leader (Peron, Chávez) with a special and direct relationship with the people, and whose succession, as a rule, poses huge problems of stability and continuity. In short, using Huntington's terminology, we are dealing with a political system with low institutionalisation and a high level of personalisation. This system is an unstable form of a system of government, which either tends towards liberal democracy or evolves towards a clear form of dictatorship.

In the second case, that of the political current, we place ourselves at the heart of current concerns and worries, because we see how such political movements are developing in many Western liberal democracies: France, Great Britain, Holland, Austria, Germany.

Populism can be understood as a median between simple demagoguery and the radicalism caused by the disappointments of perfectionism: it borrows many of the instruments of the first, exceeds it consistently, but also opportunistically uses the empty space created by the second, without having the courage to fully assimilate it and offer an alternative ideal. Populism thus offers a simplistic, reductionist political position limited in ideational scope, based mainly on stimulating the intensity, at mass level, of primary feelings.

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[2] Giosan, Victor, "Despre originile populismului" in: *Dilema veche (662)*, 2016.

Another source of populism can be identified, which resides not in the intellectual history of the West after 1945, but in its real history of the last 150 years. Western Europe has also experienced a similar phenomenon in the context of limited globalisation in the late nineteenth century and accelerated by World War I: it is about the reaction to the loss of community-rural identity of important masses of people 'thrown' into the new impersonal, urban-industrial society, where opportunities are manifested only at an individual level, and where the safety net and the familiar warmth of the traditional, hierarchical, rural society, and the 'parental care' of the aristocratic elites are missing. However, this mutation usually took place within a nation with a well-defined identity, or at most within the same space of civilisation. From that reaction were born both communism and fascism.

Something similar is happening now. National, cultural and civilisation identities feel threatened by the unintended effects of extended globalisation. We are witnessing a process of global emigration, through which masses of people come from much poorer spaces, fundamentally different from a cultural and religious point of view, in many cases without well-defined national identities, to the much more prosperous western space. Integration is much more difficult because the economic success of liberal capitalism and representative democracy cannot be reflected in a similar cultural and civilisational movement. In this context, corroborated with the ambience created by the first two sources of populism, the real fear of losing national identity and civilisation within the West becomes, directly or indirectly, the central topic of political debate. And implicitly the most important basis for the spread of populism.

Brief Historical Perspective

There are two sources of populism: Russian Narodniks and American populists. Both currents marked the last quarter of the 19th

century. Slavophile, Orthodox, Narodnik intellectuals extolled tradition and fought for *moderniyeszation* and westernisation of Russia. As a synthesis between Western socialism and peasant community raised to the level of a political organisation, Narodnicism even theorised on the advantages of economic regression. Nikolay Chernyshevsky found that "the tradition of common ownership of the land will allow the peasants to develop a cooperative production and move towards a fully communist society".[3] The idea of sacrifice for the people finds its expression in the *Historical Letters* (1869) of Pyotr Lavrov, where it is shown that intellectuals must enlighten the people but at the same time adapt to their healthy way of life. In 1876, the *Zemlya i volya* party (Land and Liberty) became the political showcase of the movement, which it gradually compromises through adventurism and the stake on an unlikely peasant revolution. The American populists, whose political expression was the People's Party, had a different social base. Independent agricultural producers were the core of the movement, and private property was the fundamental economic principle. Opponents were large trusts, banking or railways, which played an increasingly important role, to the detriment of small producers. Their political vision involved an increase in federal power to defend the interests of 'the people'. Unlike Russia, the impetus came from the people, not the elite. The identity issue of populism, therefore, comes from its problematic situation on the right/left axis. As a mixture of revolutionary socialism and economic conservatism, it stands out.

The second historical wave of the movement, Eastern European populism, was a considerable success after World War I, having representations in Romania also - Constantin Stere and Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea. The characteristics of these movements are: encouraging private property, agrarian reform and co-operation,

[3] *Ibidem.*

combating plutocracy and large land ownership, reorganising property based on labour rather than title.

Populist Typologies

The historian Kurt Treptow saw populism as a style and the dominant note of the entire Romanian interwar political spectrum. Such an approach lowers populism to the rank of a stigma, although it has an identifiable ideological basis: valorisation of the people to the detriment of the elite, of the widest possible participation in the decision-making process and direct democracy. These three hypostases can be subsumed into one type: agrarian populism.

A new type of populism, whose variants Margaret Canovan puts together under the name of political populism, appears after the Second World War. It includes populist dictatorship, populist democracy, reactionary populism, and political populism.

The populist dictatorship, also called Bonapartism, Caesarism or Peronism, is a personalised regime. The leader legitimises his power by invoking 'the people' and short-circuiting the traditional political system. The detractors of direct democracy assimilate it to the tyranny of the majority.[4]

Reactionary populism is generally a collision between the reactionary, sometimes xenophobic or racist conceptions of the majority, and the liberal and tolerant ones of the progressive elite. Progress also involves an elitist component: the most advanced teach the less advanced. But as there is no single elite, much less a monolithic people, the conflict rarely takes acute form.

[4] The most interesting example of the functioning of populist democracy is Switzerland. There, populism coexists with pluralism through a sophisticated federal structure, doubled by a culture of compromise, and the referendum is integrated into the democratic culture.

Politician populism is the most recent and visible form. New media, especially television, have facilitated the emergence of politicians who generate an audience claiming to speak on behalf of the entire population. This is how political parties without ideology (catch-all parties) appeared. The appeal to the people, above the parties and factions, has two major advantages for the one who issues it. First, direct interaction with the masses places it in a relationship of divine right, in addition to which the technician democratic representation seems ridiculous. 'Corruption', betrayal of the country', 'the party of foreigners', 'indifference to the suffering of many': the ideals are about the same. The prototype of the saviour can vary from the benevolent patrician to the charismatic politician, skilled in the use of communication techniques.

If we were to outline populism into a few defining features, they would be: a trans-ideological character, the revolt of the common man against the elite, distrust of intellectuals and politicians, orientation towards the past as a model for the future and denial of progress, small private property as a basis for economic dynamism and equity, inclination towards direct democracy or a strong leader as a form of government. Unlike nationalism, socialism, communism, or fascism, it can be part of such regimes or messages. But to deny it the right to an autonomous existence under an analytical sufficiency is an error.

And yet, we wonder, what is populism? Is it a gangrene of democracy, a perversion of democratic principles, derided in the hands (or mouths) of successful demagogues? Or, on the contrary, is populism the true democracy, the direct expression of the will of the people, short-circuiting the dark intentions of the elites to govern themselves in the name of the people?

To function properly (says a traditional political postulate), representative liberal democracy needs a relatively informed public opinion, able to judge autonomously and rationally in its interest. In this

case, even if the citizen does not have personal skills in areas such as economics, finance, or foreign policy, he will at least be able to rationally judge the programs and allegations of political actors.

On the other hand, liberal political elites, regardless of their left or right orientation, are - says a second postulate - mostly in consensus on the foundations of the rule of law, freedoms, human rights, and even some principles of foreign policy, so that, whoever comes to power, the big policy options will not change, and the adjustments will be made on secondary issues.

Finally, a third postulate says that there is a certain trust of the population in its elites, not so much that it would refrain from criticism, but in the fact that the majority agrees, despite some mistakes, that the intentions of most political actors are correct, that they are not disguised criminals or incompetent impostors. Of course, these postulates do not apply to everyone: there have always been ill-informed people who have voted without even understanding where their own genuine interests lie; there have always been anti-system parties and groups, and radical opponents; there have always been some corrupt or incompetent politicians. But so long as these phenomena are marginal, the consequences are not too serious.

When these three postulates work satisfactorily, we have genuine democracy. But when they work poorly, populism then begins to insinuate itself. From marginal, it becomes central and even threatens to become dominant, not through a coup or rebellion but peacefully, through the democratic ballot box, which makes it almost irresistible.

First, more and more people are increasingly uninformed about the world in which they live. There are several reasons for this and we can list: the decline of written culture and information through newspapers; the influence of television and, in general, the image, whose emotional tsunami often floods any rational consideration (see, for example, the infodemia during the COVID-19 pandemic); the role of the internet and

networks that broadcast in a perfect amalgam both correct information and news, as well as taxes, fakes, the difference of which is difficult to detect without a certain instruction and special attention. Hence the decline of the authority of journalists, opinion formers, and experts: via the internet, almost anyone can choose their 'experts'" to offer up any convenient lie of their choosing. The complexity of the world, on the other hand, which most of the public is not prepared to face, gives rise to new superstitions, especially in the form of conspiracy theories. Thus man becomes immune to truth and deeds and, losing his freedom of rational judgment, easily becomes the slave of mystagogues, impostors and demagogues.

The disorientation of the public allows opportunistic politicians to enter the centre of the political system and refuse the consensus on general issues. Sometimes they are kept out of the political mainstream, as in France or Germany, where they continue to grow and expand their mass base from the existing legitimate dissatisfaction (or not), threatening at some point to move even the centre of gravity of the system. At other times, the populists are right in the middle, because it has given in cowardly. British Conservatives, by borrowing UKIP's shrill policy and allowing half of the party to lead the country to Brexit, are an example of this.

So this is how populism parasitises liberal democracy, even threatening to destroy it, apparently for the good of the people. In fact, it is in the personal interest of adventurers, who, like the tyrants of ancient Greek cities, claim to want to defend the people by vile elites. In antiquity, however, there was a method by which those suspected of tyranny were sent into exile without confiscation of property: ostracism. The method is inapplicable to us who have the rule of law. And yet, how are we to remove the most dangerous populists before they take power? Impossible: we have human rights and the rule of law.

Judas the Populist

In a careful reading of the nuances, Judas is not only the traitor *par excellence* but also the prototype of the populist[5] from anywhere and anytime. Let's remember a few episodes. The first scene[6] takes place when, in the case of Lazarus of Bethany, resurrected after four days, the Christ Saviour receives a sign of gratitude from Mary, the sister of the one brought back from the dead. According to tradition in the oriental culture of hospitality, she anoints His feet with valuable oil. Judas promptly suggests (in the form of a question) that, instead of being squandered thus, the oil could have been sold for three hundred dinars (he was aware of the market situation), which could have been given to the poor. Jesus' answer is mind-boggling: you will never get rid of the poor, but you will not always have Me among you (i.e. historically incarnate). Such a reply, only seemingly cynical, was meant to dull the false philanthropic commitment of the one who would soon betray Him.

The second scene takes place on the very evening of the betrayal, with Judas previously negotiating the price of changing 'party', that is, leaving the circle of disciples to join those who wanted the death of the Son of Man. His identification takes place through the well-known Judas kiss, the improper use of a gesture to camouflage its true meaning. The last scene marks the end of the one who, after betraying, is filled with remorse. Convinced that he has sent an innocent man to death – Judas is witnessing the Saviour's trial - he tries to convince the members of the Sanhedrin that they are wrong about Jesus. They send him away, saying that his regret concerns only himself. Self-excluded from the apostles and instrumentalised by religious leaders, Judas finds his back to the wall, and suicide the only way out.

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[5] Preda, Radu, *Iuda populistul* in contributors.ro (2.10.2012).

[6] The Gospel of John, chap. XII.

What do we understand from here about our current days? First, the populist is he who systematically turns others into prisoners of his plan. Specifically, he invokes the poor, the unemployed, present or potential, the elderly and retirees, undeterred to mimic solidarity with people whose destiny is, in fact, indifferent to him. Cultivating social romanticism, the populist resembles the hero straight out of mythology who, when everything seems lost, brings forth the solution and proposes a plan of salvation. He is irresistible. Political Casanova, deceiver by profession, the sentimental crook who locates the money (or votes) of gullible victims from the corner of his eye. He promises everything. He opens wide horizons of waiting devoid of any connection with reality, unscrupulously exploiting man's capacity for self-deception. Moreover, it is the populist who vehemently announces that he will maintain and strengthen the state of affairs. The victims of his rhetoric are exempt from any effort other than to vote for him. Freezing at a given, previous, historical moment is, in fact, the general feature of populism, hence the irrepressible feeling of restoration that the populist in power produces. He wants, for example, either a 'pure race', which once existed but which is now 'diluted', or a society of equals, beyond natural differences and impossible to ignore, of character and endowment, or a 'Greater Romania' or a custom-made Hungary, i.e. radically revising the current geography, etc. The list of populist projects consists without exception of such adjustments, corrections, cuts, returns, from benefits to social assistance and increases for the wealthy. In short, with such policies the populist will display an absolute sense of justice and will mimic fusion with the passive mob, ready to acclaim the one who delivers the bread and the related circus.

Secondly, the lesson of Judas shows us that the populist takes advantage of the weaknesses of the system, as in the biblical situation with the tension between the Jews and the Roman occupiers. In an updated translation, a weak state or an incapable government party is

heavenly manna for the typology in question. The tribune of the interests of the people will thunder against the mafia, thieves and corrupted, carefully hiding their misconduct and material interest. In today's Romania, despite belonging to the EU and NATO, the construction of the rule of law has not yet been completed, and we rely on institutions capable of keeping us afloat regardless of the pitch of political life and the incessant vituperation of its leaders. Indeed, we are in a dangerously fragile situation. The human insensibility to the populist comes to light with the force of landslides after long rains. Unchained, dragging the stumps of ethical resignation and the gravel of frustrations, the mud reaches the middle of the public square, dirtying everything in its path. Just as betrayal irremediably tarnishes the relationship between people and communities, nothing being the same as before, the populist aims to destroy or at least compromise everything that others have done. He sees himself at the beginning of the world and the end of history, the first and last instance alike, the exercise of power inevitably turning into delirium.

Finally, at the maturity of his turpitude, when the light enters the darkness of the lost mind, the populist has no solution. He wakes up empty-handed. After that, just as Judas transformed into an ad hoc advocate for the poor, he seemed to promise everything, now he can no longer offer any guarantee even for himself. He is met with distrust everywhere he turns and former adherents demand his trial. Figuratively, he's a dead man. From this state of bankruptcy, the fundamental imposture that he instrumentalised only for the lust for power and money is fully exposed, and the final flight through suicide is but one step away. Death offers no deep, disturbing, or heroic solution in such circumstances, but it seems the expected epilogue for a drama that was played badly from the start. In terms of dramatic art, it is the cheapest formula; seeing no alternative, the author simply lets the character disappear. The maximum combustion used by the populist discourse

does nothing but hasten the moment when the vehicle of power must pull to the side of the road. To use this, perhaps inelegant but clear, comparison, the difference between long-term politics and populism is consumption. While the career politician thinks in perspective, inevitably and naturally going through differing moments, sometimes having the chance to govern, sometimes standing in opposition (another chance!), thus proving his character, the populist only wants power, immediate and total, putting all resources towards the service of this unique purpose. He does not possess the political intelligence to accept defeat, alternation or the diversity of actors, to wait, to have a project to which, why not, to join other forces. That is why the fate of the populists is predictable. Good news for those who, here or there, are faced with the spectre of political demagoguery.

It is therefore important not to lose our composure and not to desert the ideal.