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Populism as a corrupted democracy

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Abstract

The observance of democratic principles is clearly not enough to stop populism. The paper is aimed at answering the question: why is this so? I argue for an understanding of this phenomenon as an instrument of manipulation applied to political discourse by extremist politicians, and which becomes their style of making politics. Although democratic procedures can be used by such politicians to obtain high positions in the political realm, their further activities usually violate at least some of those procedures. The further arguments of the paper show that, behind its democratic surface, populism as a style of politics is simply a corrupted form of democracy.

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Populism as a political practice which pretends to follow the wish of the 'people' (and sometimes actually does just that) can be easily presented as a healthy democracy. Why then, is it widely seen as a corruption of democracy? One of the authors who perceived populism this way was Pierre-André Taguieff, who suggested that populism is a kind of ideological corruption of democracy (Taguieff, 1997). In fact, populist corruption of democracy can have more scopes than just the ideological and can go beyond the deformation of the very idea of democracy. It can directly affect political practice and become the very style of making politics (Moffit and Tormey, 2014; 386). However, to be effective populism needs the ideal of democracy and at least some democratic procedures that may be used to legitimize populist practices. This means that populism and democracy are inevitably linked, although in some authoritarian systems democracy may merely mimic democratic procedures and institutions. In general, however, a democratic political system appears to be a very convenient condition for those who bring into play populist ideas and declarations in a strive for power. Indeed, populism can easily defend itself by using the well-established high standing of democracy. In fact, political science writings include opinions that reject the understanding of populism as a "democratic disease" and point out that

“populism is neither democratic nor anti-democratic in itself” (Kalwasser, 2014; 483). Such statements might make a point, but they are correct only when populism is discussed as an ideology. Understanding it as a political practice allows us to see what is wrong with democracy when populism is chosen as a telltale style of making politics.

Some political scientists distinguish, among different kinds of democratic orders, “populist democracy”, but they still underline the necessity of “putting some significant constraints on popular will in the name of democracy” (Gutmann, 1995: 412-413). However, populists in their political practice usually stress something contrary: the unlimited ‘sovereignty of the people’ which is presented as ‘true democracy’.

Nowadays populism seems to be a serious threat to democracy in at least two essential aspects: as an ideal and as a political practice. It can compromise democracy by deforming its idea in its current liberal meaning and replace the whole set of democratic procedures and institutions with the simple mechanisms of political actions, which are purportedly based on the principle of majority and supported by the argument of government of the people (of course by the people and for the people). The effectiveness of populism, however, continues to stem from the overwhelming power of the idea of democracy because in a substantial part of the world democracy, despite the notorious imprecision of the concept, has become the most desirable way to organize political and social life. In fact, it has acquired the status of a “political technology of our times”, as noted by Amartya Sen (2001). In effect, “democratic” more and more often means ‘civilized’ or ‘acceptable’, in contrast to those political systems which are perceived as ‘non-democratic’. Therefore, even rulers of the authoritarian communist systems declared their political regimes ‘democratic’, labeling them bizarrely a ‘people’s democracy’ and suggesting that theirs was the only real democracy, in opposition to the Western, ‘bourgeois democracy’. In fact, appeal to the ‘people’ is assumed to legitimate populism, since in the common understanding following the sentiments and preferences of the people indicates genuine democracy. While the word ‘populism’ is applied as a depreciative term attributed to specific ideologies or political practices, those who make use of them would insist they represent the only correct democracy.

The etymology of both terms might be the beginning of some of the conceptual confusion. After all, ‘populism’ and ‘democracy’ rise from etymological roots which have identical meanings, although expressed in different languages: Latin and Greek. Both

‘populus’ and ‘demos’ mean ‘the people’. The current political reality in different states world-wide shows that the strange affinity of these terms goes further. In fact, their common linguistic base sometimes makes the complaints against populism difficult since it is democracy, acquiring the form of a ‘liberal democracy’, which imposed a variety of limits on the simple principle of the rule of the people. Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser made an adroit comment suggesting that “populism has an ambivalent relationship with liberal democracy, depicting the former as ‘bad’ and the latter as ‘good’” (Kaltwasser, 2014; 470). What then are the reasons for seeing populism as an obstacle to democracy? After all, populists might say that it is none other than liberal democracy which is corrupting the grand idea of the decisive voice of the people.

Let me start with the most trivial observation. Populist appeals and declarations are usually taken at face value, without any further reflection on the essential features of democracy developed during its centuries-long evolution. With the changes of the forms and sizes of polities, with changes in social structures, with the growth of the volume of those who were included in the category of ‘people’ which currently includes all sexes and all social strata, the rule of the people could be implemented only with the help of more refined institutional settings. The solutions developed in order to make democracy workable in modern conditions inevitably brought changes that modified its initial idea. Among those changes was the invention of indirect democracy using representation of the people and specific schemes defining a parliamentary majority, as well as the measures which are taking care of the rights of minorities. Therefore, in its current political forms democracy is not what is spontaneously assumed – that is, the simple rule of the majority.

Indeed, almost two hundred years ago Alexis de Tocqueville, in his work *Democracy in America*, started the chapter devoted to the idea of majority with the words: “The very essence of democratic government consists in the absolute sovereignty of the majority; for there is nothing in democratic states which is capable of resisting it.” (Tocqueville, 1964 ; 90). Later on, however, Tocqueville noticed measures which already in the early US democracy had mitigated the ‘tyranny of majority’. Moreover, after centuries of democratic experience we know that true majority is in practice very rare. Even in the case of direct democracy practices, like referenda, most often we are talking about a majority of only those who participated in the voting. In a representative democracy a parliamentarian majority may be far from representing a majority of the electorate. Therefore, in the current

democratic systems the principle of the majority is supplemented by a vast set of rules, such as those regarding the rights of minorities and the rule of law. In effect, the idea of democracy has considerably distanced itself from the understanding ‘government by the people based on the principle of a simple majority’. In current public debates, pointing out this distance appears to be both a demonstration of populism and one of the main causes of its success. The space for populism has been created by the tension between constitutionalism – which, in fact, limits the power of the people (including the power of a parliamentary majority) – and belief in the superiority of the ‘people’. That way populism creates the situation in which – as put by Yves Mény and Yves Surel – “Democracy (as it works) is challenged in the name of democracy (as it is imagined)” (Mény and Surel, 2002; 8).

The literature discussing populism usually stresses the problem signaled by the question: who are ‘the people’? Indeed, from a theoretical point of view, especially when populism is understood as an ideology, this question is devastating for the populist’s arguments, although it also poses one of the more difficult problems for the very idea of democracy (Dahl, 1970). However, when talking about populism as a style of making politics the issue ‘who are the people?’ appears quite insignificant for populists. Supporters of populist ideas simply locate themselves either among the ‘people’ without any deliberation about this concept or among those who pretend to defend ‘the people’s will’. Therefore, rational arguments have little chance to appear around this question. The matter becomes more complicated, however, when populists initiate a movement or create a political party. For then appeals to the ‘people’ are (in most cases) simply addressed to the segments of a society dissatisfied with certain policies of the government, and reference to the “people’s will” simply means rejection of the established authority. Empirical studies carried out over the last 50 years have shown that the forms of this rejection can substantially vary in different parts of the world and even within the same continent (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969, Taggart and Kaltwasser, 2016).

In the European Union such movements started to flourish in response to the crises which have hit the EU. In the south, this mostly involved the policy of austerity imposed on the countries suffering from the burden of debts in the Euro area – in central and northern Europe it focused on EU migration policy. As usual, the dissatisfaction of significant parts of EU societies resulted in the search for those responsible for the emerging problems. For politicians who were willing to use populist ideas, such a situation offered a chance for

political gains. These observations allow us to look at the background of populism and find out why such a reaction to crises is a serious threat to liberal democracy. In most cases we can find three elements in this background: exclusive nationalism, a simplistic view on the economy, and rejection of the elites perceived as a part of an established structures of power.

Let me start with the last element – that is, the role of elites in the power structure of the state. The vanishing trust in the elites has, of course, its reasons. Let me give a few examples. First, the economic and financial crises have undermined confidence in the expertise of the relevant specialists and politicians. Another fact which could be responsible for the birth of suspicions regarding political elites was the unmasked turn of European integration toward political union. It started with the Maastricht Treaty and invigorated the complaints about the ‘deficit of democracy’. Those complaints seem to be the beginning of the end of a ‘permissive consensus’ regarding political changes in the process of European integration. In fact, diminishing trust in the elites simply signals, especially in the sphere of politics, the process of replacing certain elites with the new ones. It is hard to deny that democratic procedures which bring certain political parties and their leaders to power create a political elite which includes, beside the top functionaries of the state or political parties, also parliamentarians who have become a part of the political elite. However, rejection of elites usually tends to be much broader, including economic, intellectual, and cultural elites, as well. Although this phenomenon has been widely studied, one of its effects has somehow not been exposed properly, and this is the elimination of meritocratic thinking (Hayward, 1996). The open rejection of the elites, expressed in public discourse, in a way creates a social barrier against thinking in terms of merits. The ideal of democracy, at its roots, assumed that the will of people would lead to the elevation of those who are the best. Such an assumption meant the possibility of building a meritocratic order. Populism ends this possibility depriving democracy of one of its important qualities. Meanwhile, the human world has reached the form of a knowledge society which can develop its potentials only if the proper role of the elites is recognized.

Eliminating meritocratic thinking goes together with the neglect of economic reasoning, which usually needs specialized knowledge. Although it is quite common that, in the case of the general public, this kind of knowledge is limited, populist declarations exploit this fact in response to popular demands. Of course, those demands may be justified by the

failed economic strategy of the government, the poor level of social protection or/and by very high income inequalities, but in many cases they are simply unrealistic in the current economic situation. Nevertheless, populists are ready to accept them in order to win electoral success. A perfect example of this kind of move is the promise of the Polish government of the Law and Justice Party to return to the lower age of retirement against economic calculations, which show that such a decision would be devastating for the future of the national economy. Deliberate use of the public's incompetence for the sake of popular acceptance is simply a case of exploiting democracy against the interests of the people since political decisions following the current wish of large segments of the public may be in the long run prove disastrous for all. Such a use of the economic incompetence of the wide public also shows that one of the features of populism is disregard for the long-run perspective. So, although such practice can still be supported by democratic procedures, it offers an exemplary case of a corruption of democracy.

Referring to national sentiments seems to be one of the most often observed routines of populists. For several reasons it has also proved to be one of the most effective. *First*, it responds to the strong need for group security. *Second*, it enhances group identity by its ethnic component, and *third*, it refers to the emotional layers which for generations have been built up by the contents of national education developing such unquestioned values as patriotism or national pride. Although those values could well serve the policy of inclusion and cooperation, populists stress rather their potentials for exclusion and confrontation with other nations. Interpretation of history which supports their specific political aims usually becomes one of their instruments. Exclusive nationalism appears to be the most destructive aspect of populism since it can be easily developed within a democratic framework and, in effect, compromise democracy. And this has already happened – for example, in prewar Germany. On the other hand, postwar constitutional solutions applied in Germany have so far been effective enough to prevent the rise of extreme nationalism. However, the case of Putin's Russia shows that nationalism may successfully counterbalance even economic policy failures.

How might democracy corrupted by populism look? Unfortunately, some of the European countries – e.g., Hungary and Poland - seem to provide good examples. According to sociological analysis the populists parties in those two countries represent about 30 percent of their populations, but were nonetheless successful in attaining a parliamentary

majority. In the case of Hungary, the parliamentary majority is large enough to make changes in the constitution. In Poland the Law and Justice Party is short of a constitutional majority, but still eager to make changes which would modify the constitutional order. Therefore it makes a very good case of a corrupted democracy. This ruling party claims the right to make all the changes it needs for unrestricted power in the country because, according to its leaders, its parliamentary majority means it represents the people, the only sovereign. Therefore, the changes it attempts to make lead to the elimination of checks and balances, starting with the new regulations which are aimed to downgrade the role of the constitution and paralyze the Constitutional Court. Moreover, interventions into the work of the judicial system demonstrate the will to make the division of powers just an empty concept.

In the current situation the most intriguing question is: can a corrupted democracy be repaired by the internal power of norms of the healthy democratic system? From current observations we know that these are exactly those norms which populist governments attempt to change. Therefore, the first step in the recovery of liberal democracy must be the rejection of populism. But this can happen only when populist policies fail to meet the demands of the public and its own promises before a full-fledged authoritarian system is established.

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