

A Reflection on Populism

Pierre ROSANVALLON

As a counterbalance to the simplistic temptations of the populism that is currently spreading within European democracies, Pierre Rosanvallon invites us to complicate our notion of democracy and make it polyphonic, because the people do not all speak with one voice.

This article is taken from the inaugural lecture delivered at the 26th *Rencontres de Pétrarque* 2011, which centered on the theme 'Do the people have a future?' A highly abridged version was published in *Le Monde* on 21 July 2011.

In Europe, two words currently stand in silent competition: 'people' and 'populism'. Paradoxically, one is a negative, pejorative term that derives from the positive foundation of democratic life. Populism is loathed, while the principle of the people's sovereignty is lauded. What lies behind this paradox? How can it be understood? And is there a right and a wrong way to be democratic? a right and a wrong way to be close to the people? These ambiguities need to be resolved. If we are to clarify the issue, we cannot be content with vaguely recognizing the fact that the people are the active, driving force within the democratic system; that they have the unquestionable power to legitimize it. The problem, indeed, is that this power is indeterminate. There is a gap between the clarity of a principle, the sovereignty of the people, the power of the people, and the problematic nature of the people as a social and political subject.

The Elusive People

Our point of departure must be the problematic nature of the people as a social fact. When reference is made to Michelet, Vallès and all those who have been the champions of the people in French history or literature, they are not speaking merely of a sociological fact. In

their writings, the people are primarily an active historical force. For them, to speak of the people is to refer to a crowd that advances in the street; a group that acts in order to disrupt the order of things. They always speak of an action in the making, a revolution that is taking place, rather than just a social group. For them, it is a people as-an-event; a force that changes the course of history; a concept that is embodied in action and absorbed by it. There is therefore no need to describe it or to resort to sociological analysis in order to comprehend it. Conversely, however, in the ordinary life of a democracy it is necessary to positively identify who that people as-a-subject is, and know how to give it a voice and represent it. Herein lies the first form of indetermination regarding the subject of democracy, which led me to use the expression 'elusive people': the distance that separates us from the people of 1789 is all the greater given that, then, the people were perceived in terms of their participation in guilds, groups and parishes. They were still linked in some way to a form of institution. To speak of the people was to refer to a social fact that was part of an institution and which therefore had an immediate meaning and image.

When the democratic revolution took place, the immediate transparency of social issues became problematic. The need for equality resulted in making the individual a constituent principle of social issues, which were consequently rendered abstract. In its own way, the iconography of the French Revolution is evidence of that. While full of multiple allegories of equality, freedom and justice, it left almost no room for the people. And when they were represented, it was in a highly abstract way: in the form of a Hercules, a kind of polar power, or even identified with an eye – in other words, with a monitoring force that was equally indistinct. The people principle becomes detached from the fate of the actual people; their political recognition makes their sociological apprehension less certain.

In democracy, the people no longer have a shape: they become a positive *number*, that is, a force made up of equals, or of individuals who are perfectly equal under the rule of law. In a radical way, this is what is expressed through universal suffrage: society is no longer merely made up of identical voices that are entirely substitutable and which are, at the founding moment of the vote, reduced to counted units that form a mass at the polls. In that context, the substance fades away behind the number, intensifying the effects of abstraction linked to the purely procedural formation of social factors.

Representing the People

In order to resolve this aporia, the task of democratic representation requires establishing a fictitious people, in the legal sense of the term, in place of a real people who have become elusive and unrepresentable. The contradiction between the nature of democratic society (society without a body) and the presuppositions of democratic politics (the establishment of a fictitious person who is represented) is therefore bound to trigger a continuous quest for representation that can never be entirely successful. Except when they create an event and take direct action, the people avoid obvious facts in a democracy. They will therefore always have to be ‘approached’ with both a political perspective and intellectual production.

Secondly, we have the problematic nature of the institutions and procedures with which to give the people a voice. After all, what justification is there for the representative system? Does it exist because direct representation is impossible in a large-scale society? Or does the representative system have its own virtues, through the obligation it creates to deliberate and explain things publicly? None of this has ever been properly resolved.

Our point of departure must be the fact that the history of democracy is one of twofold uncertainty, as shown by the difficulty in establishing the exact role of the referendum as a means of democratic expression. One must apprehend the indeterminate relations between a positive reference to the people and a far more negative reference to the notion of populism – one, in any case, imbued with suspicion. The history of democracy is mixed up with that wavering between an idealization linked to abstract definitions, and conflicting conditions of organization that have been subjected to manipulation, distortion, confiscation and minimization. Furthermore, the challenge of the debate on democracy is not merely intellectual but social as well, because there is also a continuous argument to determine what democracy means, to whom it should give a voice, and how individuals can influence leaders.

A third uncertainty clouds our language. It stems from the fact that the people are not simply a commanding principle but also the substance and social form of democracy. They are the embodiment of the shared experience, and the form of a society made up of equals; in other words, a consistent way to create a society. They only exist in the form of a promise or a problem, or a project to be undertaken.

Reflecting on Populism in Order to Better Realize Democracy

These three forms of uncertainty are part of a modern democracy. Today, however, they have become especially acute. The first reason for this is the public's growing democratic demands. The incompleteness of democracy is felt all the more keenly because the citizens' means of intervening are more extensive and better developed. Even more so due to the rise in the inequality and separatism that increasingly undermine social issues. This failure of democratic society reinforces the structural incompleteness of the democratic regime and raises the question of the representation of the collective issue of democracy.

It is on that basis, and not according to preconceived definitions, that populism should be considered. As a first approximation, Marx's words could be applied to it: it is both the symptom of a real distress and the expression of hope. It was born out of a crisis. It does not only express an inherent evil. It is the meeting point between political disillusion – caused by a lack of representation, a malfunctioning democratic regime and the connection between that disillusion and social disarray, linked to the failure to resolve the social question today – and people's increased awareness of their impotence, the absence of alternatives and the opacity of the resulting world.

From this perspective, populism can be understood as a kind of simplistic, perverse response to these difficulties. That is why it cannot simply be apprehended as a political 'style', as some describe it, by reducing it to its demagogic dimension.

If we wish to have a better understanding of democracy, we also need a clearer grasp of what populism is, for an understanding of democracy cannot be separated from an understanding of its perversions. Exploring the question of populism in greater depth helps us to better comprehend democracy, with its risks of distortion, confiscation, its ambiguities and incompleteness. While there is sometimes indignation or concern in Europe over the growth of populism, we also need to understand that concern, to be aware of people's indignation, and to reject both vague moralism and haughty contempt. We should not limit ourselves to Pavlovian condemnation in order to turn the word 'populism' into a specter that has not been theorized or thought through. The question of populism, indeed, lies within that of democracy. It is not an external parasitic contamination; its presence forces us to reflect on democracy in order to make it work better.

From that point of view, the parallel with the totalitarian phenomenon becomes vital. In both cases, there is indeed a perverse apprehension of the representative ideal and democratic forms, as well as the tendency to simplify the question of the division of social issues into an exaltation of the One and of homogeneity, whether that be in reference to the people as-a-class or the people as-a-nation, both constructed a rejection of the 'other'. To be sure, there is a considerable difference: totalitarianism defined a form of power and constructed state institutions, whereas populism structures – in a vaguer and not as coercive manner – a political culture of democratic disintegration. However, at the same time, populism is turning out to be a 21st-century example of the way in which democracy turns back against itself, as 20th-century totalitarianism did. It is therefore just as urgent to reflect on the latter now as it was to consider the former from the 1950s to the 1970s, even if making that comparison also draws attention to the ambiguities that this term carries, and should therefore help us not to draw absolutes by widening the category of populism.

Historians here find themselves compelled to highlight the fact that this category has a longer and more complex history than that of totalitarianism. In order to bring their undertaking to fruition, they would need to go back a long way, obviously starting with the sycophants of Ancient Greece, who, establishing themselves as 'watchdogs of the *demos*' that were proud to bite the calves of those in power, in a demagogical and anti-political manner corrupted the work of institutions for public prosecution of the authorities in power (in the absence of a public ministry). They would also mention the People's Party of late nineteenth-century America, or the Russian *Narodnichestvo* of the same period, which mirrored each other in their idealization of direct democracy and the righteous peasant people. Or Napoleon III's claims to exercise a plebiscitary power with no go-betweens, praising the unity of the wholesome people against 'dividers' who were, for him, embodied by the opposition parties and groups. One should also consider the South American regimes, which, from Perón in the past to Chávez today, have likewise extolled direct communication between the masses and the authorities, claiming to set themselves up as authorities that properly embodied society. It is therefore possible to distinguish between populisms of government, populisms of opposition, and even populisms of denunciation.

Those, however, are just specific cases, whereas contemporary populism is a phenomenon that lends overall structure to contemporary democracies. The list of movements that can thus be defined is long indeed: Jobbik in Hungary, the National Front in France,

Northern League in Italy, the Swiss People's Party, the Danish People's Party, the Progress Party in Norway, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands (established by Geert Wilders), Timo Soini's True Finns Party, and Vlaams Belang in Belgium. The most worrying aspect is that populist parties have gained extremely powerful electoral victories in a region that was formerly a symbol of social-democracy and, quite simply, a bastion of democracy: Scandinavia. This is the reason why it is now imperative to see populism as an integral part of democratic life and not just a kind of temporary, localized deviation.

The Threefold Populist Simplification

Naturally, it has to be considered as a plural, diversified phenomenon. Nevertheless, these movements have common traits of language, doctrine and practice that can be described. What are these? They can be summarized if we consider the doctrine of all those parties and movements that are labeled populist to be based on a threefold simplification. Firstly, there is a political and sociological simplification: seeing the people as a clear subject that is defined by its distinction from the 'elites'; as if the people were the wholesome, unified part of a society that would come together as soon as cosmopolitan groups and oligarchies had been dismissed. Of course, we live in societies that are marked by the secession of the rich. Yet, the existence of an oligarchy and the fact of that secession are not enough to define the people or to consider it as a unified mass. A negative principle simply cannot define that society.

Secondly, there is a procedural and institutional simplification. Populism believes that the representative system and democracy in general are structurally corrupted by politicians, and that the only real form of democracy would be an appeal to the people; in other words, a referendum. It also suspects that intermediary bodies, such as the courts, are indifferent to the suffering of the people; it even publicly vilifies all regulatory authorities legitimized by a principle of impartiality as being undemocratic and corporatist. One of the first things the Orban government did under pressure from the Jobbik party in Hungary was therefore to limit the powers of the constitutional court, labelling it an 'aristocratic' body. This example enables us to underline the fact that, while there are populist movements, there is also a tendency within some conservative governments in power to head in the same direction.

Last but not least, the third simplification concerns the conception of the social link. Populism believes that it is a society's identity that brings it cohesion, not the internal quality of its social relations. This identity is always defined negatively, based on a stigmatization of

those that must be rejected: immigrants, or those of other religions (hence, for example, the centrality of the Islam question today). This is not a new issue. At the end of the 19th century, with the very beginning of globalization in the 1890s, this way of conceiving social issues already existed. It was a time when already representative government was in crisis in Europe as well as equality, because of early globalization. In the 1893 elections in France, Maurice Barrès published an election manifesto entitled *Contre les étrangers* ('Against Foreigners'). To his way of thinking, equality inevitably went hand in hand with xenophobia, linked to a form of national-protectionism – he liked to say that he was the ardent defender of 'protectionism for workers.'

Complicating Democracy in Order to Fully Realize it

If we believe that populism is based on a simplification of democracy – a simplified understanding of what is meant by 'the people'; a simplified vision of those procedures that are likely to support democracy; a simplified idea of what is shared – then overcoming the drift towards populism requires us to reflect on the way in which democracy can be fully realized. For no one can claim to combat or halt populism by limiting himself to defending the current state of affairs, or defending democracy in its present form. In order to criticize populism, it is therefore necessary to have a plan for reinventing and rebuilding democracy. In which direction should it be taken? I shall provide a few brief ideas.

First of all, our basis should be the principle that democracy must not be made simpler but, rather, more complicated in order to be realized. No one can claim to own the people, and no one can claim to be their only spokesperson, for the people only exist in partial forms and manifestations. Initially, the people exist in arithmetic terms: the electorate. They are the most vital, because everyone can make the people speak by saying 'society thinks that,' or 'the people think that,' but no one is able to say that 51 is less than 49. The people as an electorate have a kind of clarity and power. They are both a leading force and a pacifying force in democracy, because they wield the power of the final word. Majority rule is the power of the final word, and is authoritative for that reason. The problem is that the definition of the people or of public interest should encompass the *vast* majority of society and not only its majority. In that respect, democracy is based on a form of fiction: that the majority represents the whole of society, which is not the case. This is the reason why other public figures should be called upon. But which ones?

First of all, those who could be referred to as the social people, who exist through actions linked to conflicts, through the formation of a community of hardship, based on fragments of history experienced together. Reference could also be made to that indistinct, vague opinion that exists through the Internet. The Internet is not a medium but a social form; a kind of direct, moving materiality of a public opinion that previously only existed by its representation through institutions, media, and survey techniques.

A third form of the people plays a vital role: the people as-a-principle. This people are defined by those elements that form the foundations of community life. They are represented by the law, the founding rules of the social contract, the Constitution. If the constitutional courts are led to play an increasingly important role in modern societies, then that is the reason. They represent that people-principle which cannot be confused with the majority. A constitutional court can thus have the power to revise the laws passed by a parliament.

Finally, there is a fourth type of people, which could be called a random people. In some cases, this is so difficult to represent that a lottery system is used in order to form an image. This is the lottery of a jury of assizes, or that of the participants in a consensus conference. The important thing is to make room for these different peoples: the number-based electorate, the social people, the people-as-a-principle and the random people. For the people always tend to be brought closer together. In order to give them a voice, their means of expression must therefore be multiplied. There needs to be polyphony.

On the other hand, sovereignty must be increased, for there is no single means of expressing and bringing alive the public's will. First of all, electoral expression is only sporadic, whereas there is a continuous demand for democracy. That cannot take the form of a push-button democracy, even if it were technically possible today. For democracy cannot be reduced to a decision-making regime; rather, it is a regime of public will, which develops over time. It requires developing a project and a collective history, not just saying 'yes' or 'no', or choosing an individual. For that reason, the modes of expression and voices of a democracy must be increased, and something permanent must be created out of them. This cannot be done just by increasing votes, but through citizen involvement as well, and by multiplying the terms of a continuous democracy. For example, by subjecting leaders to enhanced monitoring, more frequent rendering of accounts, and methods of control and

evaluation. Citizens cannot expect to be behind every decision, but they can have collective power over the control, monitoring, evaluation and ongoing assessment of the authorities.

Democracy: Deliberating, Interacting and Establishing a Shared Existence

Democracy must therefore be made more complex in order to be realized. To that end, public institutions, which go beyond the elected government, must also be established. If an authority can say, “as I am elected, I have every right”, then that authority does not fit in with an adequate definition of democracy. Being elected gives legitimacy, but not the ability to take *any* decision. The government in power must accept that its decisions will be subject to discussion and questioning. Democracy is a regime of deliberation; it is a regime that continuously debates those issues that are the subject of public decisions.

Ultimately, democracy can be defined in terms of quality. There is increasing public demand for democratic quality, beyond procedures relating to elections and representation. What is that democratic quality? It is the way in which a government behaves, by rendering accounts, providing explanations, and involving associations and intermediary groups that are affected. It is what I have called a ‘democracy of interaction’: a democracy in which there is continuous interaction between the authorities and society, and not merely a democracy of authorization - which still many governments believe it to be.

The third vital element required to make democracy more complex is finding the means of creating a shared experience that has meaning; creating a society that is not just a collection of individuals. This is one of the basic problems that we face today. Democracy is a regime that produces a shared existence. That shared existence is not only the important, formal moments of election victories, although elections can rightly be considered a celebration of democracy. It is not limited to those great movements of public jubilation or collective demonstration, even if, when millions of demonstrators take to the streets in a country, something momentous is taking place. It is not merely shared festivity or a shared demonstration, but rather the common factor that makes a democratic society define itself in terms of shared trust, redistribution, and the fact that its members agree to share something. This is why, in the history of democracy, the history of the welfare state is inextricably linked to that of the democratic regime.

Lessons Learned from the Late 19th Century

There is an important lesson to be learned from the late 19th century: at a time when social forces and their xenophobic language were gaining strength all over Europe, the socialist and republican response was to decide that the issue at hand was not that of identity or homogeneity, but rather a matter of redefining the social question and establishing a social state. The real response to the crises in representative government and equality at the end of the 19th century, when globalization was just getting underway, consisted in developing a form of democracy that cared more about public welfare, by establishing political parties in which each individual could find his or her place and become integrated; and also developing the welfare state.

Today, as we experience the second wave of globalization, we are in exactly the same situation. We are at a time when we, too, need to redefine and enrich democratic life by establishing a more interactive democracy, not just a democracy of authorization; furthermore, we need to redefine the social contract. The issue at stake is a democracy that defines itself according to what lay at the heart of the American Civil War and the French revolution in the 19th century: the quest for a more egalitarian society.

Nowadays, one word is universally triumphant: justice. This is true both for general public opinion and for political philosophy, with all its theories on justice. However, we also need to relearn a true language of equality. Not only in economic terms but also in terms of creating shared experience. I believe this to be the task that now lies ahead of us. If we rebuild that shared experience, if we try to expand the democratic idea, then we will find an answer to the issue of populism: not simply a Pavlovian rejection but a broader, deeper form of democratic life.

First published in laviedesidees.fr 27 September 2011

Published in booksandideas.net 10 November 2011.

©booksandideas.net