

# Populism

Some commentators say that populism can be left wing or right wing. We do not accept this. Maduro has different objectives to Trump, Corbyn has different politics than Farage.

Populism is not anti-capitalist. It is not therefore popular. The Labour Party and trade union movement are more popular numerically, culturally and with historic achievements. The working class is rooted, real and revolutionary. Populists are lumpen, volatile and reactionary.

Populists bring together maverick billionaires with disaffected, unorganised workers in an unholy, mutually loathing alliance. They substitute a notion of 'the people', in place of the reality of class. They imagine the people against the corrupt elites, they do not seek the replacement of the capitalist economic system. Populism arises when there is general increasing alienation from lack of popular sovereignty offered by the political system. It represents frustration and legitimate concerns about the failings of bourgeois democracy.

Populists oppose the corruption of the political and media institutions, the liberal and neoliberal elites while having no plausible plan to replace them. They pretend to speak for the silent majority, those scorned and neglected and oppressed by all wings of parliamentary politics and the arrogance of pundits and commentators. They claim to work to bring practical benefits to working families and express a superficially attractive contempt for all elements of the so called 'Establishment.'

When in power as in say Poland, or Hungary, or Italy they are capable of creating great instability and a lurch to totalitarianism. Populists tend to live in the shadow and command of more sinister fascistic forces. Their noisy, abrasive, sound bite style is attractive to the controversy-loving, ephemeral media.

Rather than condemning the free movement of labour as a tragic consequence of neoliberal policies, war and poverty, populism focuses its condemnation on immigrants themselves in a racist way. It individualises systemic problems. It blames all 'others' for what are in fact the effects of capitalist relations of production and imperialism. It dwells on the surface of events ignoring real causes.

Unsurprisingly populism glorifies its philosophy as anti-theoretical, anti-ideological and anti-philosophical. It appeals to mindlessness, to extreme pragmatism and it fosters ignorance. Its theory of rejecting political theory is deeply theoretical and culminates in the concept of charismatic leadership, the rule of strong, aggressive emotions and leaders. It is ideally suited to meet the sensationalist, headline grabbing needs of the capitalist press and media. It is therefore continually glorified and pumped up by capitalism.

Populism opposes the globalism of capitalism and argues instead for a resurrection of nationalism. It does not approve of, or necessarily recognise, a concept of working-class internationalism, nor of a nation democratically controlled by its own working class. Its view of nation is narrow minded, chauvinistic, introverted. It imagines a cold lager, fish and chips and bull terrier sense of nationhood! It misuses the genuine desire of workers in all nations to prosper where they live and transforms it into an empty slogan.

Its view of nation is completely hollow. It envisages the idea of the chosen nation being 'first' and being better than any others. It cannot escape the concept that the nation is composed only of those of a pure national blood line. It is at heart racist, rather than uniting a working class in a nation to control the nation, it thinks that only the elite of an indigenous, non-immigrant population can

rule. Those 'gifted' to run the nation will run it on behalf of those less so. Instead of being ruled by old Etonians, we confront the danger of being ruled by delinquents.

Neoliberalism's disregard for national democracy requires clownish defenders of the nation. They associate nationalism with repulsive right-wing attitudes and usefully confuse the issue. Swathes of the liberal left fall for it hook line and sinker and equate nation with nasty and conveniently forget a nation is nothing other than its working class. Growing capitalism needed the nation state. Declining capitalism requires freedom from the nation state to prop itself up globally. Working class nationalism and socialism are in fact inseparable.

Economically a populist approach around the world seeks to protect domestic production while favouring trading more with the US than either the EU or China. Its economic protectionism is as hypocritical as its anti-free movement of labour charade. This is because it is for free trade and the free movement of capital. These, along with war and poverty, underpin the mass migrations of people.

Populists will oppose the unrestricted import of people more fiercely than they will the import and export, on a daily basis, of billions of pounds in financial transactions of capital.

While praising ancient, reactionary, superstitious beliefs, whether in the Catholic Church or reborn evangelism, populism pursues a disregard for existing state institutions and the richness of national art and cultural treasures. Its mythical traditionalism runs alongside an unpredictable anarchy and reliance on a small group of leaders. Often it promotes one leader who stands out from any conventional crowd or political pattern.

Unless populism builds its own armed forces, as Hitler did, or gets the support of state forces, or conducts a coup d'état, it remains a volatile force perpetually destabilising parliamentary parties and undermining the values of solidarity of the working class. It remains an unarmed gangster dealing with armed gangsters.

At a time when the working class needs a strong, united state to rebuild out of the ashes of neoliberalism and create political class unity, the thrust of populism, which is so uncritical of capitalism, is primarily to oppose the cause of the workers. For all its superficial hatred of the Establishment and what it terms as 'elites', vested interests and hostile media, populism hates a class-conscious working class most of all.

Like the working class, it opposes the loss of identities of belonging and community and opposes the rise of identity politics and the fragmentation this creates. But rather than heal the divisions these trends create with a sense of class solidarity, it develops the politics of hatred of the liberal left, and torments categories of individuals which it sees as deviant from the norm. It opposes liberal lifestyle politics with the politics of intolerance at a personal level.

Populism is always aggressively anti something. Its tone is dismissive and rude. It prides itself on facing enemies continuously and projects an almost indiscriminating iconoclasm. No one and no institution is, it argues, free from the corruption of the established swamp that it wishes to drain whether in the White House or Westminster or Warsaw. This ultimately seeds hatred of the universal franchise.

It is hardly surprising that its virulent disrespect, anger and paranoia concentrates in some of its adherent's minds into such toxic intensity it manifests as terrorist violence. Individual acts of killing of groups and personalities, who for the populist assassins represent the epitome of the 'enemy,' are psycho-anarchic features of populist culture.

Populists replace the idea of defined political ideologies with the idea that there is only 'gut instinct,' a kind of natural righteousness unsusceptible to challenge or the mildest scepticism. Based on the shifting ground of gut instincts, populism lacks the coherence and systems of belief and values that any progressive theory requires to sustain a profound challenge to the system.

At one point of the spectrum finance capital has been keen to promote the extremism of Medieval fundamentalism and terror groups. In Europe, the US and now Brazil it has sponsored the slightly softer rise of the new dogmatists whose attitude to debate mirrors their contempt for democracy.

Rejecting the ponderous scrutiny of state institutions, populists favour spontaneous reaction and giving instant commitments to solving immediate problems. Their promises are not rooted in ordered budgets and long-term plans or political power. Hence, they inevitably prove bad managers. The most magnificent creations of the popular vote in Britain, the education system, NHS and welfare state would be quickly destroyed in the hands of populists. Their focus on social policy issues and their political inexperience, lead them to disregard the importance of running things well.

It is no surprise either that populists like to imagine they reflect the will of the people. They do not arise organically from the actual organisations of the people in the community, professional, trade union and social movements. They cloak themselves in the mantle of the people, and yet lack the capability to be accountable to the people. They emerge from outside of the organised working class.

In 1970s Britain leading trade unionists warned of the dangers of the upper echelons of the Movement siding with the corporations. The TUC and Labour Party at that time construed social contracts and wage restraint pacts under the delusion that workers wage rises were causing economic problems and should be restrained. What followed was mass unemployment and de industrialisation and a two-thirds drop in trade union membership. The Labour Party then dropped Clause IV and lost working-class support.

The weaker the organised working class, the more likely usurper populists are to arise. This is one reason why the late Bob Crow and Tony Benn were so adamant that the trade union and socialist movement should lead the campaign against the EU. If we did not, they warned, darker forces from the right would.

The liberal left consistently fails to differentiate between different forms of capital and their relationship to the nation. Merchant, industrial and finance capital all have different characteristics and different roles, progressive or reactionary at different times in history.

Generally, British based merchant capital and industrial capital did not ultimately support the EU project whereas finance capital did. All sections were divided about this, but in general terms the global reach of mobile finance capital broke ranks with its root in the nation, and foot loose and fancy free, squandered the nation's wealth in gambling and over-rode our Parliament.

Merchant capital and small manufacturers spurred the English Revolution in 1649. Industrial capital powered the Empire aided and abetted by slavery. Finance capital in turn de industrialised Britain and replaced the power of the House of Commons with the market. It became Britain PLC run by a few round the boardroom table.

The working class has been divided. Historically artisans, skilled and unskilled manual industrial and agricultural workers have been in the leadership. With de-industrialisation, the organised leadership in mines, docks and engineering, shipyards, mills and manufacturing receded. New groups in teaching, health, public and civil service held the banner. Many of those, and more importantly

many more amongst the unorganised, cosmopolitan technocrats in the new economy brought a new metropolitan liberal leftism into the picture.

While materially these categories were workers, many were seduced by social discussion relating to identity, culture, endless protest, and infinite campaigning. The bonds of community and family solidarities had gone and with them the sense of economic interdependence. The new narrative was one of individualism not common solidarity.

Such political trends owe more to old fashioned ideas of personal freedom within capitalism and nineteenth century liberalism than modern socialism. These positions chime naturally with the illusory freedoms underpinning the EU. They resonate also with the idea of breaking borders to open to a global world. They hate racism but remain silent on the devastation of those countries who have lost huge sections of their populations to emigration.

The liberal left parallels in some forms the odious right-wing nationalists it so despises. It adds an unpleasant snarl, however. The liberal left hates with a passion those they see as uneducated, non-intellectual, or 'workers.' The vile outpouring against the referendum result has shown the depth of this hatred. Both right and left share a contempt for democracy. The liberal left, in particular, cannot comprehend a trade union and deeper working class understanding of democracy in which majority votes rule.

Populists distrust all existing 'democratic' structures because they are not agile enough to meet the people's needs and because they reflect the decadence of existing institutions. The liberal left has a distaste for democracy because, rather awkwardly, the mob, the great unwashed, who fought for the universal franchise in the first place, can express their imperfect and downright daft opinions through it and even elect a Chavez or a Corbyn.

These are therefore dangerous times for democracy. If the House of Commons, whose full voice was only achieved in 1969 with votes for all over 18, denies the biggest mandate ever given to it, or ignores key elements of what it means to leave the EU, that is the reassertion of national self-determination, then the EU's work will be done, and populists will rule over us.

## Note

The Guardian uses definitions of populism developed by Cas Mudde which assert that populism can be right wing or left wing and provide statistics for the rise of 'populist' parties in the world and Europe. The statistics are revealing, the definition incorrect. We must identify populism with reaction.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2018/nov/20/revealed-one-in-four-europeans-vote-populist>