Populism, or, politics at the edges of democracy

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The verbal smoke surrounding populism

Neopopulism and neocorporatism are regular entries in our political lexicon, yet the meaning assigned to the prefix ‘neo’ is not as clear in the former as it is in the latter. The rather unambiguous meaning of neocorporatism derives from the conceptual stability of its classical referent in the mainstream literature of political science. In the case of neopopulism, the prefix has not fared as well, partly due to the contested status of populism as such.

One only needs to look at the cluster of meanings associated with the term. The account offered by the sociology of modernization prevailed throughout the sixties, at least in the developing world. A classical exponent of this approach is Germani, who sees populist mobilization as a deviation in the standard path from traditional to modern society. Di Tella proposes a modified yet equally functionalist interpretation. For him, populism is the result of the convergence of two anti-status-quo forces, the dispossessed masses available for mobilization and the educated elite that resents its status incongruence—the gap between rising expectations and job satisfaction—and broods on ways of changing the current state of things. More generally, theoretical interpretations range from this functionalist view of populism as a road to modernize class-divided, traditional societies, to Lasch’s claim that populism is a response to the crisis of modernity; from Laclau’s initial neo-Gramscian approach to populism as a dimension of the popular-democratic imaginary whose class-nature varies in accordance with contending discursive constructions, to Cammack’s revival of a Marxist standpoint that associates the phenomenon with resistance to neoliberal capitalism, albeit with a functionalist twist whereby the changing status of neopopulism is read according to the weathervane of capitalist reproduction.

Moreover, as Worsley maintains, the term is wide enough to encompass right- and left-wing variants, to appear in advanced and in developing countries, in towns and in the countryside, and amongst workers and the middle classes as well as peasants. It includes political phenomena ranging from the Russian narodnichestvo of the nineteenth century to William Jennings Bryan and small farmer movements in the USA during the thirties and the classical Latin American populism of the forties and fifties. The latter, exemplified by Argentina under Perón and Brazil under Getulio Vargas, was characterized by strong nationalism; the perception of the state as both a political bounty and the prime mover of economic activity; economic programmes based on subsidies and price
controls, import substitution and the protection of local industry; a cavalier allocation of government resources to reward followers and punish opponents; the use of public spending to build networks of patronage disregarding criteria of fiscal or monetary responsibility; the enfranchisement of the urban underclass of descamisados (shirtless) or cabecitas negras (dark heads) and their mobilization against the oligarchy; the creation of mass political parties; the growth of trade union militancy shadowed by governmental control of organized labour and its use as a reserve army for mass demonstrations in support of the party or the leader; the cult of personality that aggrandizes the stature of the leader and turns him or her into a quasi-messianic figure; and the role of leaders as political brokers that bypass formal mechanisms of representation whenever it suits them.

On the political side of the disagreement, those who have focused on the more worrisome traits like the messianic nature of its leaders or the submission of trade unions to the government see it as a negative phenomenon. Others find it hard to reject many of its avowed goals when taken at face value, as they read like a wish list for a socialist and radical-democratic agenda. Among them: the continual appeal to the people, the claim to empower the ‘common man’, the capacity to motivate largely un-political individuals to participate, the emphasis on welfare policies, or the professed aim of restoring some dignity to politics, which instead of representing the aspirations of society often functions as a pork-barrel business run by jaded political impresarios. This, together with the anti-liberal bias discussed below, helps to explain why parts of the Third World intelligentsia saw populism as a positive phenomenon in the sixties and seventies, particularly socialist intellectuals who championed nationalist and anti-imperialist demands.

Things have changed quite radically in recent years without dispelling the polemic around the meaning of the term. Populism today seems to bear very little in common with its classical referent, except, perhaps, for the self-perception of the leader as a saviour of the nation and the standard—albeit often demagogic—observance of the premise that ‘virtue resides in the simple people’,\(^5\) which begs the inevitable questions of who ‘the people’ are and how the meaning of the term varies from one case to another.\(^6\) Nationalism and economic protectionism are virtually gone, and popular mobilization tends to be minimized; in its wake, we are left with what one author has called ‘a marriage of convenience’ between neoliberal economics and neopopulist politics.\(^7\) To talk of a marriage does not settle the question either, for despite the general advocacy of market liberalization, the differences in the policies they follow once in office remain far too large to allow us to identify this as a common denominator that could function as the genus of the more recent incarnations of the populist experience.

To complicate matters further, the populist drive seems to be virtually indistinguishable from the ‘politics of faith’—as Oakeshott calls it—that has characterized a wide range of reform movements throughout modernity. For example, the will to renew politics, the vindication of ‘the people’, and the presumed immediacy of their link with the leader or the party are present in political movements that are not usually branded ‘populist’. One cannot fail to notice that the terms we have been using—populism, modern politics, democracy, and reform—do not cease to overdetermine or contaminate one another and that the conceptual frontiers between them are rather unstable. This puts a
limit on any pretension to disambiguate fully the ‘as such’ of populists vis-à-vis politics. The conceptual contours of the term remain fuzzy, and its theoretically contested status unabated.\textsuperscript{8}

This does not mean that the phenomenon is intractable. Worsley puts it quite fittingly when he says that ‘since the word has been used, the existence of verbal smoke might well indicate a fire somewhere’.\textsuperscript{7} Is this fire sufficiently distinct as to beget an acceptable descriptive concept? I have some reservations about how precise one can get, although there is a growing awareness that populism might be less of a standalone phenomenon than one that intertwines with contemporary politics. Hayward sees it as a response to the failures of elitist democracy in the European polity, whereas for Canovan it emerges in the ever-present gap between the pragmatic and the redemptive faces of democracy.\textsuperscript{10} Laclau has taken this idea further, suggesting that we should regard all politics as populist to some extent. ‘If populism consists in postulating a radical alternative within the communitarian space, a choice in the crossroads on which the future of a given society hinges, does not populism become synonymous with politics? The answer can only be affirmative.’\textsuperscript{11} There is some truth to this view, but one needs to say something more in order to avoid a simple and direct conceptual overlap between politics and populism as well as to account for non-radical instances of the populist appeal.

In line with the above discussion, I will situate the phenomenon in its relation to both modern politics and democracy. The evidence for this link is mixed. In the more intuitive use of the term, populism, old and new, is a label applied to crowd-pleasing politicians hard to distinguish from demagogues who will make any kind of promise, no matter how unattainable, as long as it advances their cause, and who will tweak legal procedures and institutional arrangements shamelessly to adjust them to their needs. This, of course, applies to other political movements too. The commonsense use also describes an ambiguous observance of democratic practices and a general dislike of liberal institutional settings. Whether they are in government or in opposition, the populist impatience with formalized decision-making processes leads them to invoke their trademark distrust of elites as a sweeping device to override institutional constraints on their actions. Perhaps one can attribute this to their inexperience with the intricacies of the legislative and judicial process, for they see themselves, legitimately or not, as political outsiders. Whatever the reason, their disdain for the procedural channels and for the checks and balances of the democratic process reflects a strong anti-establishment ethos that might explain why liberals are not particularly keen on populism. They see its more traditional variants as something like the old Caesarism with a democratic dressing. Yet even when latter-day populists warp the operational mechanisms of a liberal-democratic framework of politics—representation, partisan competition, accountability, and due process of law—they invest considerable energy in defending their democratic credentials and reassuring critics of their observance of that framework. Either as mere posturing or as an actual practice, the democratic vindication is part of the populist imaginary. That is why populism is not an accident but a recurrent trait of democratic politics, although the persistence of authoritarian variants is a reminder that one must keep a level head when thinking of this relation.

Drawing from this, I will claim that we can think of populism from a
theoretical perspective as a recurrent feature of modern politics, one that iterates itself within both democratic and undemocratic settings. There are three modes of populist iterability worth examining. If one looks at the phenomenon from the standpoint of the political subsystem, populism appears to be a fellow traveller of contemporary, media-enhanced modes of representation at work in both emerging and well-established democracies. This would be fully compatible with the institutional regime form of liberal-democratic politics. A second possibility shifts the focus to participatory channels hidden behind the normality of democratic procedures. As a symptom or paradoxical element that can both disturb and renew the operation of democratic politics, the populist mobilization functions as a mirror where the latter can look at the rougher edges that remain veiled by the gentrifying veneer of its liberal format. These two manifestations of populism can thrive in a democratic setting, but the third possibility works as an underside that can endanger that setting. It also emerges from within democratic politics, but as a ‘misfire’ whereby populism can morph into authoritarianism all too easily. This is a reminder that the phenomenon can be something more dangerous than a mode of representation or a disturbance, as it can also signal a threat or an actual interruption of democracy. Taken together, the mode of representation, the idea of a politics at the edge and the possibility of the underside, will enable us to recast the populist experience as an internal periphery of liberal-democratic politics.

**Populism as a mode of political representation**

The first iteration positions the discussion at the level of the political regime: we can regard populism as a mode of representation that has become part of mainstream democratic politics. In specifying this link, it will become clear that the reciprocal applies too. As Macpherson once claimed, while the expansion of suffrage rights led to the democratization of liberalism, the permanence of market society and representative government contributed to the liberalization of democracy. Similarly, the presence of a populist mode of representation in liberal democracies is not just an arithmetic addition to that setting; it also brings about a geometric dislocation insofar as it permeates the practice of democratic politics itself.

How do we describe a populist ‘mode of representation’—warts and all—as part of the territory of democratic politics? One way of approaching this is to draw from authors who have referred to a populist style or mode of persuasion. Knight conceives it in terms of a set of features—the rapport with the people, a confrontational mentality, personalism, and mobilization and claims that ‘style’ is the basis for a looser model of populism that actually fits better with the phenomenon. ‘Fit’ might not be the most felicitous term, for despite the avowed instrumentalism and nominalism of his definition of the populist style, it evokes, at least implicitly, the problems associated with a correspondence theory of truth. However, if one leaves it aside, both the features Knight mentions and his emphasis on the relevance of a more flexible view based on the idea of style open up a productive line of enquiry. It tacitly accepts the impossibility of establishing a Cartesian-like definition of the populist phenomenon, which in turn confirms Oakeshott’s well-known claim that the political vocabulary of modernity cannot extricate itself from some degree of ambiguity.
Canovan also speaks of style, which she describes as the ability to communicate in tabloid-like language, offer political analyses that are as simple and direct as the solutions they propose, and, in general, a knack for appearing to be the embodiment of transparency. Similarly, Kazin’s study of populism in the USA refers to it as a style of political rhetoric or as a mode of persuasion, one whereby speakers use everyday expressions, tropes, themes, and images to convince large number of Americans to join their side or to endorse their views on particular issues. In the USA, he says, this language has undergone many transformations. The nineteenth-century heritage of Americanism and its virtues—the producer ethic constituting ‘the people’, and an elite that opposes and exploits ‘the people’—drifts into a more conservative territory in the late twentieth century with the appearance of the moral majority, the criticism of ‘Big Government’, the scorn for the cultural elite, and so on.

Once again, this seems quite correct. My hesitation here is that a populist persuasion built on the strength of a simple and direct language, which entails a reduction of the complexity of the issues presented to the electorate, seems to be characteristic of contemporary politics generally. Likewise, the appeal to the people or the interpellation of the common people against the status quo is also a distinctive trait of democracy, or at least of those who mobilize the redemptive side of politics. Perhaps the distinction is a matter of degree, but then there is the problem of measuring the intensity of the appeal. Schmitt, for example, differentiates friend-enemy or political oppositions from all others in accordance with the criterion of intensity: the former are the most intense because they can lead to the extreme case of war. Yet this presupposes a telos of intensity, for the closer any opposition gets to war, the more political it turns out to be, to the extent that then war becomes not the limit but the quintessence of politics. I suppose that a similar problem would plague a distinction between populism and democracy based on the appeal to the people or the use of a certain rhetoric or mode of persuasion.

That is why I suggest we shift the focus to representation, which maintains a family resemblance with both style and rhetoric but also connects populism with mainstream politics. The usual way of dealing with this link is to say that populism arises as the result of a crisis of representation, as a response to either the incapacity or the refusal of elites to respond to people’s concerns. While there is some evidence to support this view—for example, right-wing exploitation of xenophobia to construe the underclass as an excluded other of the political system—the reference to ‘crisis’ also narrows down the scope of the populist experience to moments when politics fails to address participatory or other demands. Heeding Panizza’s advice to distinguish ‘populism in the streets’ from ‘populism in power’, one could argue that the emphasis on the exception does not allow us to differentiate populist politics in opposition, when the motif of the breakdown of representation is more likely to be salient, from populism in government, when the possibility of such a crisis tends to be dismissed but a populist style might remain in place all the same.

Instead of focusing on the moments of crisis, we could look at the very notion of representation and see how populism takes it on. The concept refers to a rendering-present, to summoning a presence in another place, bringing into presence through a substitute or, more in tone with political representation, an ‘acting for others’, for absent others, in a way that is responsive to their
This acting for others presupposes three things. First, the existence of two levels, one occupied by those being represented and the other by those who act for them as representatives. Second, that there is a gap between these levels, which prevents collapsing one into the other and therefore distinguishes representation from self-government. Third, as the ‘re-’ of representation involves a repetition whereby ‘the people’ return through a substitute,\(^2\) that which ‘returns’ cannot be reduced to an unaltered sameness, to a mere expression of pre-constituted identities and interests. Like any iteration, the task of ‘rendering-present’ introduces a differential element that modifies the absent presence of ‘the people’. In other words, presence is an effect of representation insofar as it involves a drive to configure the identity and interests of the represented by addressing the classical questions of ‘who we are’ and ‘what do we want’.

Populists are notoriously ambiguous about this. On the one hand, they have always claimed to speak in the name of the people and to use their language, to be the voice of those who have no voice and the agency that summons their presence to the political stage. This is often more the expression of a desire than a reality, for, as de Ipola reminds us, the gap between the conditions of production and the conditions of reception of appeals to the people does not guarantee the success of those appeals.\(^4\) On the other hand, populism has also been rather hazy about who the people are, conceiving them variously as the dispossessed, the hard-working middle classes, the burdened taxpayers, the ‘common man’, the moral majority, and so on. One might say that, regardless of all this vagueness, the populist rendering-present of the people requires the standard distinction between a certain ‘us’ and a ‘them’ characteristic of political oppositions. This presupposes an effort to configure the identity of the people and to specify the disagreement that pitches them against named adversaries—the elites, Big Government, or what have you. This is correct, but even then the populist ‘us’ remains conveniently vague. It does so in order to blur the contours of ‘the people’ sufficiently as to encompass anyone with a grievance structured around a perceived exclusion from a public domain of interaction and decision hegemonized by economic, political, or cultural elites.

A similar ambiguity surrounds the gap between the absent presence of the people and the action of representing them. The gap is bridged by a ‘presentation’ that forgets the iterability at work in the ‘re-’. First, because populism postulates the presumed immediacy of the link between the people and the leader, in which case there is no absence but only a joint presence without representation. Second, because it claims that the trusted leader is a vehicle for the expression of the popular will, which dissolves the gap between the represented and the representatives in favour of the latter by fiat of tacit authorization. What we have here is an alleged double and simultaneous full presence, of the people and of those who act for them. A representation that pretends not to be such reflects a clear bias for presence. Like Rousseau, populists distrust representation as a corruption of the general will and see themselves less as representatives than as the actual voice of the people, but, unlike Rousseau, they also distrust initiatives that empower citizens and that encourage their autonomous initiatives. This ambivalent oscillation between the independent action of the people and the instrumental appropriation of that action furnishes populist representation with a convenient alibi. As Barthes says about myth,\(^5\) it always appears to have an ‘elsewhere’ at its disposal; it uses it to put the spin on its position vis-
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à-vis representation, participation, and mobilization. That is why some say that populism releases the unadulterated energies of the people, while others claim that it is little more than the shackle that condemns them to a position of subservience to the leader. Yet, in both readings, the leader appears to be a symbolic device. As the presumed incarnation of the popular will, or as a trustee of the people, his (or her) role is to simplify the issues and to disambiguate the identity of the populist camp.

What does this tell us about the populist mode of representation? We have flagged that it revolves around a promise of inclusion and intervention in the public sphere, the ambivalence concerning the ‘immediacy’ of the relationship of representation, and the personalization of the leadership that functions as a symbolic condensation of the movement. Why is this different from the conventional take on political representation? When Pitkin conceptualizes it, she discards both the Hobbesian notion of authorization and the symbolic ‘standing for’. Instead, she settles for ‘acting for others’, for she believes that this formulation deals with the substance of the activity itself instead of the formal arrangements surrounding the action. Populism departs somewhat from this view. As a mode of representation, it rests on a crossover between ‘acting for others’, the re-entry of authorization under the guise of trust for the leader, and a strong symbolic dimension that seeks to produce an effect of virtual immediacy, that is, an imaginary identification that suspends the distance between masses and authorities. My contention is that today this crossover is prevalent within liberal democracy itself.

The work of Manin is relevant here. Despite the widespread belief in a crisis of representation, he says, what we are experiencing today is its metamorphosis. He identifies three consecutive forms of political representation in the west. These are: classic parliamentarianism of the period prior to the introduction of male universal suffrage, the party democracy that dominated Europe throughout most of the twentieth century after the emergence of mass parties, and the audience democracy that arrived in the seventies with the decline of those parties, the impact of the mass media on elections, and the formation of a veritable political ‘stage’. They all share the same principles—the election of representatives, the autonomy of these representatives, the role of public opinion and trial by discussion—although these appear differently in each of them. We are familiar with the second form, Kelsen’s Parteienstaat or party government, whose demise many continue to mourn as a loss of the gravitas of politics; the old hegemony of fiery leaders and disciplined party apparatuses eclipses in the wake of audience democracy and its media-enhanced candidates basking in the cool glow of technopolitical expertise. In the democracy of ‘audience’, says Manin, there is something like a supply-side politics that aims to identify the relevant cleavages within the electorate in order to differentiate the candidate from its adversaries; media experts replace the party bureaucrat and the activists, and electoral discipline weakens due to the volatility of party loyalties from one election to the next. For its critics, audience democracy transforms politics into a spectacle run by media and marketing professionals. Former US President Gerald Ford refers to this type of politics in a caustic remark about the dangers of pointless manipulation when he speaks of ‘candidates without ideas hiring consultants without convictions to run campaigns without content’.
This might be a somewhat unfair rendering of audience democracy. Opinion polls and electoral marketing might replace the serious pondering of party manifestos and electoral promises, says Manin, but they also help voters by reducing the complexity of the issues and lowering the cost of access to information on those issues. More importantly for our enquiry, in audience democracy the populist mode of representation becomes more salient due to the personalization of the link between candidates and voters. For Manin, people today tend to vote for a person instead of an electoral platform or a party, and while parties do not lose their central role as electoral machines, they tend to become instruments in the service of the leader. He gives two reasons for this, both of which support our claim that populist representation has gone mainstream. One is that the channels of political communication, mainly radio and television, affect the nature of the representative relationship: candidates can now communicate directly with their constituents without the mediation of party networks. In a way, he says, this entails a return to the face-to-face character of representation in the nineteenth century. This is true, but given that mediations have been reconstituted rather than disappeared, we can provide a more rigorous depiction of the phenomenon and argue that the mass media enable a semblance of immediacy or, better still, that they give rise to a mode of political representation characterized by the ‘as if’ of virtual immediacy. This ‘as if’ sublimates the representative link by veiling the gap between the people and those who act for them. The second reason Manin gives for the personalization of political options is that the scope of governmental activity has expanded substantially, and elected officials must make decisions on a wide variety of issues that a party platform can neither foresee nor specify in advance. In fact, he says, governmentality requires something analogous to what Locke called ‘prerogative’ power, that is, a certain discretionary margin whereby elected leaders can ‘take decisions in the absence of pre-existing laws’, which means that the personal trust in the candidate becomes an adequate basis of selection. Manin concludes that ‘representatives are thus no longer spokesmen; the personalization of electoral choice has, to some extent, made them trustees’.

In many ways, then, audience democracy intertwines with populist representation conceived as a crossover between acting for others, authorization, and the strong role of symbolic imagery. We can see this at work in the case of Mexico. Vicente Fox, the victorious presidential challenger who put an end to 72 years of hegemony of the ruling PRI, obtained the nomination of his centre-right PAN not by lobbying the party hierarchy or mobilizing the faithful inside the party apparatus. He obtained it thanks to an ad hoc organization, Amigos de Fox (‘Friends of Fox’), which mounted an impressive media campaign to present him as a no-nonsense candidate in touch with the feelings of the common people. The popularity of Fox rested on his communication skills and the work of the team of advisers that designed his campaign. His success hinged on the way he connected this popularity with the claim for political renewal. People trusted Fox and felt they had a direct rapport with him. This allowed him to acquire supra- and extra-partisan legitimacy that the leadership of his own party did not like but could not stop either, so in the end it had little choice but to follow the lead of public opinion and anoint Fox as its candidate. The PAN and its allies benefited from the pro-Fox electoral tide; they gained more elected
positions than they would have had otherwise, although they obtained fewer
votes than Fox himself.

Opinion polls and electoral studies conducted in the aftermath of the general
elections of 2 July 2000 agree that those who voted for Fox did so less for what
he said than for what he symbolized. People saw him as the most credible
option for ousting the PRI, says Flores, to the extent that the majority of those
who voted for him and his electoral coalition were betting on the idea of change
regardless of the specific content of that change.34 In Manin’s terminology, the
advisers of Fox perceived that the central cleavage within Mexican society was
one between continuity versus change—and not, as the centre-left PRD had
calculated, between the sovereign nation and the forces of neoliberalism. If we
look at it from the standpoint of discourse theory,35 the virtue of Fox’s campaign
managers was that they identified ‘change’ as the novel empty signifier needed
to suture the Mexican political field and, more importantly, they succeeded in
presenting their candidate rather than his party as the agent capable of effecting
a symbolic appropriation of that signifier. Either way, this shows that Fox built
his electoral strategy around a typically populist mode of representation—‘acting
for others’ and the symbolic ‘standing for’ welded together by an authorization
based on trust—that has become intertwined with contemporary politics. He
developed a virtual or media-based face-to-face relation with the electorate,
presented himself as the representative of the will of the people, was graced by
the trust that people invested in him regardless of the actual platform on which
he campaigned, and became the torchbearer of the idea of change.

**Populism as a symptom of democratic politics**

If this mode defines populism virtually as a mainstream phenomenon, the
second iteration moves into a different territory that positions it together with
other radical movements in the rougher edges of democratic politics. Here the
argument concerning populism and democracy shifts from the institutional site
of the political regime to the democratic imaginary of modern politics. Drawing
from Žižek’s Lacanian work, we could interpret populism as the return of the
repressed or, better still, as a symptom of democracy, that is, as an internal
element of the democratic system that also reveals the limits of the system and
prevents its closure. In his interpretation—which iterates and hence reformulates
Freud’s—the symptom can be seen as the fundamental element of ideology. The
working of ideology, he says, requires not so much a false consciousness among
those who participate in a given social reality but rather that they ‘do not know
what they are doing’, in which case a symptom could be defined as ‘a formation
whose very consistency implies a certain non-knowledge on the part of the
subject’.36 The subject can enjoy his symptom as long as its logic escapes him.

Žižek illustrates this through an example borrowed from Marx’s theory of
commodity exchange, or rather from Alfred Sohn-Rethel’s reading of it. The
universality of the commodity form presupposes that every exchange is always
an exchange among equivalents. Yet this universality happens to be an empty
universality or, as he calls it, a mere ideological universal insofar as labour power
is a special commodity whose use—the actual expenditure of labour—generates
surplus value over and above the market value of labour power itself.37 That is
why the system gives rise to an equivalent exchange, but also to a paradoxical
equivalence—between labour power and its salary—that functions as the very form of exploitation. Labour power, he says, is a special commodity; it represents the internal negation of the universal principle of equal exchange of commodities. Žižek caps this by saying that utopia consists of ‘a belief in the possibility of a universal without a symptom, without the point of exception functioning as its internal negation’, which suggests that the actual working of any system presupposes a symptom. One may add that if the misrecognition of this fact is required to maintain the semblance of equal exchange and therefore to enable the effectiveness of commodity exchange, any effort to unveil the special status of labour power introduces a measure of disruption into the system, although this does not necessarily entail its implosion.

Let us connect this with the discussion about the interiority of populism and democracy. What is the status of this interiority? Earlier we described it as a mode of representation, but the symptom offers us a different angle. Populism as a symptom functions as a paradoxical element that both belongs to democracy and interrupts its closure as a gentrified or domesticated political order. We can formulate this through an analogy with the discomfort caused by the arrival of a loud guest at a dinner party: the hosts are not particularly happy with the awkward visitor but cannot get rid of him either, so they will do their best to downplay his antics in order to make the rest feel as comfortable as possible. How does this relate to populism? Politics in representative democracy generally presupposes the priority of institutional mediations over charisma, the presence of checks and balances to limit the discretionary powers of political leaders, the widespread practice of reaching agreements through negotiations among political elites, and so on. Populism disrupts democracy by mounting its challenge on the redemptive face of democracy, often to the detriment of law and order. As a promise of redemption, it exerts pressures on the presuppositions of representative democracy, and to some extent warps them through the mobilization of the people to bypass institutional constraints. Either way, it plays the role of the awkward guest of the example; it is both an internal moment and a paradoxical element that disrupts the gentrified domain in which politics is enacted in liberal democracies. Put differently, the populist challenge undermines the fullness of any democratic expression of the will of the people, including its own.

I borrow the reference to gentrification from Žižek, who in turn uses it to recast Lefort’s distinction between politics and the political. In Žižek’s reading, politics is the site where the contingency and negativity of the political are gentrified in a political ‘normality’, forgotten in an order that has the status of one subsystem among others. Gentrification here stands for domestication, for what Foucault designates as the political normality arising as the end result of war; we can think of it either as the self-perception of liberal democracy or as the horizon towards which it aims. Gentrification is something akin to a Rawlsian ‘veil of ignorance’ that conceals the partiality and inequality of participants as a requisite condition for justice, or, to put it in Žižek-speak, the means through which citizens enjoy their symptom in liberal democracies. Like in the presumed universality of commodity exchange that masks the special case of labour power, it creates a semblance of impersonal institutional virtue that conveniently overlooks the shadier deals concocted regularly among the political and economic elites. Populism functions as the symptom of this gentrified domain by bringing
back the disruptive ‘noise’ of the people; it puts objectivity at stake by announcing the return of the founding negativity of the political. In short, by disrupting gentrification, the populist mobilization, like all radical challenges, iterates the contingency of all political arrangements.

We can look into this from a perspective closer to political and philosophical language, as is Rancière’s conception of politics as the enactment of a disagreement. While he does not speak directly of populism, one could argue that gentrification corresponds to what he calls the order of police, which conceives the city as a distribution of parts without remainder, as a hierarchy of parts and their functions that cancels out the polemic nature of politics.42 Populism disrupts gentrification insofar as it summons the demos, that is, what Rancière would call ‘the party of the poor’. But the demos, he says, can only be an improper part, for the poor—or in the preferred language of populism, the common people—represent the part of those who have no real part in the polis except for the empty property of their freedom. For him, the impropriety of the demos, which is the scandal of democracy, brings into play the constitutive torsion or disagreement of politics. To the extent that populism mounts its challenge on the strength of its mobilization of the demos, it prevents any reconciliation of the community, and therefore interrupts the closure of liberal democracy as pure elitism or as detached pragmatism.

To cut to the chase, populism may function as a symptom of democratic politics in two senses. As a promise of redemption and as an index of what Canovan calls the reaction against politics as usual, it both disrupts the order of gentrification and expands the scope of citizen involvement in public affairs. Yet as the element that ‘falls out’ of the gentrified system, it positions itself in the rougher edges of democratic politics, in a grey area where it is not always easy to distinguish populist mobilization from mob rule. In this interpretation, populism might not necessarily break loose from a democratic setting, but it becomes something of an unstable phenomenon within that setting. In the terms suggested earlier, it becomes its internal periphery.

**Populism as an underside of democracy**

Having said this, the very fact that it has a capacity to disrupt democratic politics compels us to enquire about the darker possibilities that can come along with populism. As a political practice that takes place at the rougher edges of representation, populism can be conceived both as a mirror in which democracy can scrutinize its more unsavoury faces, and as an experience that can become (or not) its underside.

Here we can mention Canovan’s depiction of populism as a shadow of democracy. Following Oakeshott, who distinguishes between faith and scepticism as the two styles whose interplay characterizes modern politics, Canovan speaks of the two faces of democracy—redemption and pragmatism—that require one another and cohabit as two squabbling Siamese twins.43 She claims that the populist mobilization arises in the gap between them, primarily as a way to counteract the pragmatic excesses of established democracies. By locating populism in this gap, Canovan manages to develop a conception of populism that retains a relation of interiority with democratic politics. Populism is not the ‘other’ of democracy, but rather a shadow that follows it continually. This is a
very good observation, and I would like to take it as a starting point to discuss
a supplementary semantic connotation of the metaphor of the shadow, one that
is required if one wishes to avoid loosing populism in the vastness of democratic
politics. For this is the issue: to establish the connection between populism and
democracy without overlooking the gap that separates them. What is missing in
the metaphor is its additional meaning as an underside. From horror films to
mystery novels, the literary device of the shadow is a topos of something
ominous; it functions as a signpost to announce the perils that may lurk ahead.
It is no different in this case. Critics have warned against the allure of populism
by citing the dangers it poses for democracy. The cult of personality can
transform leaders into quasi-messianic figures for whom accountability is not a
relevant issue, and the populist disregard for institutional checks and balances
can encourage rule by decree and all sorts of authoritarian behaviour while
maintaining a democratic façade. In addition, the Manichean distinction between
good common people and corrupt elites can become an alibi for using strong-
arm tactics against political adversaries, and the continual invocation of the
unity of the people—as right-wing populists show us continually—can be used
as means to conjure pluralism and toleration.

Yet democracy is always exposed to the threat of an underside, populist or
otherwise. If democracy, as Lefort describes it, is ‘instituted and sustained by
the dissolution of the markers of certainty’, by a process of questioning implicit in
social practice, and by a representation of unity dependent upon political
discourse bound up with ideological debate,44 then in limit situations its very
functioning may provide the conditions of possibility for the underside. This
danger, he says, arises when the exacerbation of conflicts cannot be resolved
symbolically in the political sphere and a sense of social fragmentation pervades
society. When this happens, there is a real possibility for the ‘the development
of the fantasy of the People-as-One, the beginnings of a quest for a substantial
identity, for a social body that is welded to its head, for an embodying power,
for a state free from division’.45 This fantasy is present in the populist temptation
to confuse the government with the state, which amounts to a perversion of
representation.46 It would also appear when the internal paradox of the populist
mode of representation is resolved on behalf of the leader, that is, when the
leader no longer acts for others because he or she presumes to incarnate those
others and therefore believes to be authorized a priori. Oakeshott refers to this
as the messianic twist of the politics of faith.47 A good example is Hugo Chavez
in Venezuela, a progressive yet often troubling leader imbued with an overriding
sense of purpose. Here, the gap that differentiates representatives from the
represented—and that sets limits to representation as ‘acting for others’—
operates haphazardly: instead of the crossover mentioned earlier, representation
is gradually confined to a symbolic ‘acting for’ or, worse, to a Hobbesian
authorization whereby the gap is dissolved in favour of the representative.

Lefort also refers to the populist invocation of social justice,48 a key element
that has sustained its classical appeal among the dispossessed. He refers to this
when he says that populist movements often build their relation with the masses
through the mediation of welfare policies, and that this relation might have a
negative effect on the empowerment of individuals and on the health of demo-
cratic practice. The reason is as follows. Social justice and the redistributive
policies through which it comes about certainly improve the life of people by
satisfying basic needs. Yet populists see this mostly as a top-down process, as a vertical link connecting political leaders and governmental decision-making bodies with grateful masses. The problem with this type of link, says Lefort, is that it:

instigates what de la Boétie called ‘a voluntary servitude’. Being drawn to populism and to the leader, or putting the destiny of all in the hands of the leader, merely highlights this form of servitude. [...] What is the point of social justice if all the measures are decided by a government that seeks the obedience of its citizens as repayment for the rewards it offers, and if such a justice does not awaken in the people awareness of their rights, of their sense of endeavour, or of their freedom of association?49

Servitude, voluntary or otherwise, turns citizenship into an empty shell.

Populism as an internal periphery of democracy

This disempowerment of citizenship—despite verbal reassurances to the contrary—is a reminder that populism can also project a darker shadow on democracy. Just as Canovan could claim that democracy—or at least, and more precisely, modern politics generally—has two faces, redemptive and pragmatic, we may contend that the populist shadow does too, for it follows democratic politics as a promise and as an underside. As a promise, it can contribute to political renewal by harnessing the participatory energy issuing from the redemptive drive of modern politics, but as an underside, populism can turn out to be dangerous. Reiterating Canovan’s analogy, the promise and the underside resemble a pair of squabbling Siamese twins, except that while the promise might merely disturb the more gentrified functioning of the democratic process, when the underside gets the upper hand, democracy is ready to leave the political stage.

The contours of populism emerge in the shape of a double bind that describes not its democratic nature—for we have seen that this cannot be decided by decree, and that there can be undemocratic populism too—but the ambiguous and often tense relation of interiority it maintains with the practice of democracy. Populism can flourish as a fellow traveller of democratic reform movements and put democracy in jeopardy. This double bind suggests that people like Canovan, but also Worsley and Hayward, are right in proposing that any enquiry about populism is at the same time an enquiry about democratic politics. Yet it also shows that this works as a conceptual strategy only if one stipulates that it can also refer to its rougher edges, to a reflection about politics played at the edges of democracy. More precisely, one could speak of three modalities of the populist iteration with regard to modern democratic politics—as a mode of representation, as a symptom, and as an underside. The actual valence it adopts is undecidable, as it can go in one direction or in any of the other two. However, determining when the mode of representation and the disruptive edge cross the line and become an underside of democracy is a matter of political judgement and cannot be settled by conceptual fiat.

That is why I refer to the phenomenon as an internal periphery of democracy and of modern politics generally. The expression safeguards the relation of
interiority with democracy we have been developing, but it also conveys the idea of an edge and, more importantly, the undecidability associated with the term. Like any border or frontier, a periphery is always a hazy territory that indicates simultaneously the outermost limit of an inside and the beginning of the exterior of a system. Populism can remain within the bounds of democracy but can also reach the point where they enter into conflict and perhaps even go their own separate ways. This, I believe, portrays the paradoxical status of the relationship between populism and democratic politics.

Notes
8. In many ways, we could describe populism as an ‘anexact’ object. I take this paradoxical expression from Deleuze and Guattari, who in turn borrow it from Husserl’s writings on protogeometry or science that studies vague, vagabond, or nomadic essences. ‘Protogeometry’, they say, ‘is neither inexact like sensible things nor exact like ideal essences, but anexact yet rigorous (“essentially and not accidentally inexact”). The circle is an organic, ideal, fixed essence, but roundness is a vague and fluent essence, distinct both from the circle and things that are round (a vase, a wheel, the sun) … At the limit, all that counts is the constantly shifting borderline.’ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, London, 1988, p. 367. The notion falls outside the binary opposition between exact and inexact, for the vagueness of the contours of anexact objects is a requisite condition and cannot be formalized as a clear truth-value. Populism could well be an anexact object and therefore any precise description faces a real and perhaps insurmountable limit.
17. Kazin, p. 3.
18. Ibid., pp. 12–17, 251ff.
31. Ibid., p. 220.
32. Ibid., p. 221.
33. Ibid., p. 226.
37. Ibid., p. 22.
38. Ibid., p. 23.
45. Ibid., p. 20.
47. Oakeshott, pp. 28–9.
49. Ibid., pp. 141–2.