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Concepts in the Social Sciences

Populism

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Contents

1 Introduction

Populism is an unusual concept. Look at anything closely enough for a period of time and it will begin to seem unusual, but even the most cursory of glances at populism shows it to be out of the ordinary. Populism has many of the attributes of an ideology, but not all of them. At times, it has had great resonance across the world, and yet at other times it has been inconsequential. It has an essential impalpability, an awkward conceptual slipperiness. For different sets of people it veers between having great meaning and fundamental vacuousness. For elites it is both an object of fascination and a phenomenon of great distaste and danger. To be catalysed into a political force it sometimes relies on great leaders and sometimes on great masses. Where it relies on leaders, it requires the most extraordinary individuals to lead the most ordinary of people. Appearing to be revolutionary, populism draws great support at times of crisis but, in practice, it is invariably reformist and incapable of offering fundamental 'root and branch' reform. It is episodic, appearing at times with great force and offering the potential to radically transform politics. But it soon dissipates. It is not without effect; when at its height, it invariably structures the content and tone of politics. Wherever there is representative politics, it is omnipresent as a potential movement or set of ideas to be drawn on by movements.

In short, the phenomena which observers and participants describe as populist are unlike movements which form parties, develop programmes and policies and lead relatively stable and patterned political lives. Populist movements have systems of belief which are diffuse; they are inherently difficult to control and organize; they lack consistency; and their activity waxes and wanes with

a bewildering frequency. Populism is a difficult, slippery concept. It lacks features that would make it more tangible. Rooted in it are characteristics that render it quintessentially mercurial. For these reasons, it is profoundly difficult to construct a generalized description, let alone a universal and comprehensive definition, of populism as an idea or as a political movement.

Isaiah Berlin talked of the 'Cinderella complex' of populism, whereby we seek a perfect fit for the 'slipper' of populism, searching among the feet that nearly fit but always in search of the one true limb that will provide us with the pure case of populism (quoted in Allcock 1971: 385). The warning is clear: a search for the perfect fit for populism is both illusory and unsatisfying and will not lead to a happy ending.

Ernesto Laclau offers a similar warning about how populism can end up vanishing if we study it too closely. He describes a process whereby we start with the assumption that there is something called populism, so we define it, look for examples of it, study them, and then refine our definition so that it fits the examples we studied. When we seek to then give a general definition we resort to comparing the specificities of the movements but, because they fundamentally differ, we end up dropping populism (Laclau 1977: 145). This circularity is certainly a danger, and I am not sure it is one we can fully avoid.

I approach these problems in these pages by exploring six key themes that run through populism:

- populists as hostile to representative politics;
- populists identifying themselves with an idealized heartland within the community they favour;
- populism as an ideology lacking core values;
- populism as a powerful reaction to a sense of extreme crisis;
- populism as containing fundamental dilemmas that make it self-limiting;
- populism as a chameleon, adopting the colours of its environment.

The six themes are designed to be independent and capable of interacting with each other in different ways. Context is therefore important but should not blind us to the possibility of generalization. The possibility of generalization is an important part of social science and, in the spirit of Weber's ideal types (Weber 1968: 19–22),

the themes here constitute an ideal type which never exactly conform to any one case, but which aid our understanding of the particularities of any one case by reference to generality. They are useful, then, in both guiding us through the specifics of any particular case and helping us gain a general understanding of populism.

At its root, populism, as a set of ideas, has a fundamental ambivalence about politics, especially representative politics. Politics is messy and corrupting, and involvement comes only under extreme circumstances. In this sense, populism seeks to avoid habitual political involvement. Populism is reluctantly political. Overcoming their reluctance, populists engage in politics when they perceive crises. The way populists are eventually political also gives expression to their ambivalence. Eschewing the complexity of representative politics, populists advocate simplicity and directness in their politics. The accoutrements of representative politics, including parties and parliaments, are all too often, for populists, distractions and unnecessary complications. It is a profound dilemma for populism that while representative politics is treated with hostility, it is only under such a form of politics that populism finds systematic expression and the possibility of mobilization as a political force.

While populism is a negative reaction to representative politics, it does have a more positive side. Populism tends to identify itself with an idealized version of its chosen people, and to locate them in a similarly idealized landscape. In doing this, populism excludes elements it sees as alien, corrupt or debased, and works on a distinction between the things which are wholesome and those which are not, between what I shall term the 'heartland' and the margins. Populism therefore has implicit within it a conception of a heartland. This is a notion that is constructed through looking inward and backward: a world that embodies the collective ways and wisdom of the people who construct it, usually with reference to what has gone before (even if that is idealized). The heartland is populated by 'the people' and gives meaning to constructions and invocations of the people by populists. Some suggest that a commitment to 'the people' is what defines populism. This is problematic because 'the people' means fundamentally different things to different populists (Canovan 1984). It is much more fruitful to recognize that the commitment to 'the people' is a concept that is derived from a sense of a heartland.

Populism has been a tool of progressives, of reactionaries, of democrats, of autocrats, of the left and of the right. The reason for

its adaptability lies in the 'empty heart' of populism: populism lacks a commitment to key values. While other ideologies contain, either implicitly or explicitly, a focus on one or more values such as equality, liberty and social justice, populism has no such core to it. This explains why populism is appropriated by such a wide range of political positions. It also explains why populism is very often appended to other ideologies. Populism's natural position is as an adjective attached to other ideas that fill the space at the empty heart of populism. The 'grand' ideologies of the modern age – liberalism, conservatism, feminism and socialism – are likely to have adjectives attached to them to make them into social liberalism or radical feminism. Populism is more likely to attach itself than be attached to.

The emergence of a crisis shakes populists out of their reluctance and into politics, and into an active defence of the heartland. The difficulty is that the crisis may be one in the imagination of the populist or it may be an economic and political crisis in the true sense of the word (i.e. a situation that cannot, by definition, be sustained). I do not want to make the judgment about whether the crises are real or imaginary, so it is easier, and perhaps more accurate, to observe that populism comes about when a larger process of transition gives rise to a sense of crisis, at least among one social group.

Populism's ambivalence about politics helps to explain why it is so often an episodic phenomenon. Eschewing the institutions, forms and patterns of representative politics, populism deliberately tries to translate the simplicity and plain-talking of ordinary people into structures that are simple and direct. Locking on to leaders or bypassing parties altogether, however, has its problems, and these mean that populism is invariably a passing phenomenon. It limits itself because of its attitude towards institutions.

Populism has an essentially chameleonic quality that means it always takes on the hue of the environment in which it occurs. This is not as a disguise or camouflage, because populism is *always* partially constituted by aspects of the environment in which it finds itself. Another way of saying this is to say that populism has primary and secondary features, and that one of its primary features is that it takes on, as a matter of course, secondary features from its context. All ideologies do this to an extent, but populism constructs narratives, myths and symbols that, because they must resonate with the heartland, draw on the surroundings to a fundamental degree.

In summarizing the themes, it is possible to suggest that populism is a reaction against the ideas, institutions and practices of representative politics which celebrates an implicit or explicit heartland as a response to a sense of crisis; however, lacking universal key values, it is chameleonic, taking on attributes of its environment, and, in practice, is episodic. Populism is an episodic, anti-political, empty-hearted, chameleonic celebration of the heartland in the face of crisis.

Populism appears not only in many different places and times but also in different forms. As an epithet, 'populist' has been fitted to movements, leaders, regimes, ideas and styles. The popularity of populism as a term attaches disproportionately to the last, but least, of these. To say that things are done in a 'populist' manner is not to tell us much about the politics of populism. If they are done in a populist way because they embody a deeper commitment to populist ideas, then it is on the populist ideas that we should focus (cf. Richards 1981). Often populist style is confused with a style that simply seeks to be popular – to appeal to a wide range of people. This is not simply an incomplete but also an inaccurate use of the term.

Populist movements and parties, politicians, regimes and ideas are the focus of this book because looking at them unlocks the key to understanding the politics of populism.[1] Culturally, populism runs through societies as a celebration of the virtue of ordinary people and often as romanticized visions of the lifestyles and landscapes, but I am concerned here with populism once it is a political phenomenon, when it is mobilized. In this sense, populist movements and parties (whether created from the bottom up or from above by leaders) underlie all the other manifestations. Populist leaders create movements and parties to legitimate them. Populist ideas are only political in so far as they are taken up by movements and parties. Regimes rely on leaders and, in turn on the parties and movements that legitimate them.

Looking at what populism can be demonstrates that it is rarely just a movement, leader, regime or idea. Usually it is a combination, but notably it is never all of these at the same time. In the case of the US Populist movement at the close of the nineteenth century, we have a genuinely popular movement with a developed and complex set of populist ideas, but we also have a movement that never made it into government and so never became a regime, and

we have a movement that was not tied to any one particular leader. In contrast, the Latin American experience of populism has been the opposite, in that it encompasses the regimes of particular figures (such as Juan Perón in Argentina) whose leadership was more important than the construction of a populist set of ideas or of a populist movement. In the case of the Russian *narodniki* at the end of the nineteenth century, there was the attempt to spread a set of ideas through the leadership of the educated and the hope of creating a popular movement, but again a failure to take the reins of power. With political figures in the politics of the United States, such as Huey Long in Louisiana and George Wallace in Alabama, we have leaders with populist ideas but without movements. In these two cases it is valid to talk in terms of regimes as these men implemented, as much as they could, populist policies. We have, in populism, a variety of not only manifestations but also a variety of forms in which these manifestations occur.

Looking at examples of populism in history can be frustrating. If we seek to use populism to explain politics in any one case, we invariably end up somewhat irked by the awkward shape of the concept of populism. Inevitably, in the light of expert and specific knowledge, the concept is taken, slightly reshaped, refashioned and polished so that its sheen reflects much better the specifics of the example to hand. The concept becomes therefore a better reflection of the context but less faithful to the idea of a universal concept of populism. In its newly fashioned shape it can even become an integral part of the way we explain politics in the context. But as soon as we examine the way it has been similarly reshaped and refashioned to explain politics elsewhere, the resemblance seems limited.

Each case of populism tends to lead to emphasis on one of the factors present as the definitive feature of populism. Looking at the Russian case, it is tempting to see the peasantry and the romanticization of peasant life as the key to populism. But looking at nineteenth-century populism in the United States, our attention is far more likely to be on agrarian radicalism that has little in common with the romantic view of the Russian peasant. Moving south, Latin American populism shifts out of the countryside to become a movement for the urban working classes. Populism in Canada has drawn on farmers and on agricultural workers. And coming to Europe, the new populism of the far right becomes fundamentally urban and

exclusionary. Moving round the globe and through history does not move us, in itself, closer to the essence of populism.

If we try and take a more generalist approach and use a range of examples to illustrate the concept, we face another irksome fact. None of the examples illustrates all of the facets of populism. Some come close (notably the example of the US Populists in the nineteenth century) but none go all the way. Populism, as an empirical phenomenon, is an uncomfortable composite of historical and contemporary cases. This has led some to reject the search for its essence and to instead content themselves with dividing it up into different types (among them Canovan, 1981, 1982). In the following pages, I attempt to show that it is worth attempting an ideal type of populism through examining specific populist movements, parties, ideas and regimes.

In Part One I offer a survey of the history of populism as it has appeared in different cases. This part provides the empirical material around which the conceptual discussions of the rest of the book are built. The selection of cases is not easy. There are many other examples that can be characterized as populist but which I have not included, but I have attempted to bring to the fore the major examples of populism. My purpose in providing five chapters describing various populisms is to provide a brief introduction to those histories without which we cannot have a full understanding of populism. In the process I draw out elements of populism.

In Chapter 2, I survey the various definitions of populism that already exist and suggest that we should differentiate between three approaches to populism as a concept. First, and most commonly, *contextual* definitions are confined to one particular example of populism. Second, *variegated* definitions deny that there is a universal essence of populism and seek to construct taxonomies of different populisms. Third, as I am attempting to suggest in this book, there is the attempt to build a genuinely *universal* understanding of populism.

Those readers looking for comprehensiveness in the cases I focus on will not find it. Those readers looking for particular exclusions may well find them.[2] The main emphasis I have taken is on North America, Russia, Latin America and Western Europe. The choice of these is for a number of reasons. First, the cases represent as near to a 'canon' of populisms as we have. In other words, these are the cases that are most usually used when we talk of populism. Second, these cases separately highlight key features of populism and

collectively constitute a minimally sufficient set for understanding it. The North American cases exemplify a mass movement of populism. The Russian case highlights a rural romanticization of a heartland. The Latin American cases show us the importance and problems of populist leadership and regimes. Finally, the Western European cases bring out powerfully the anti-institutional element of populism.

Another reason for these cases is that many of the individuals concerned either explicitly call themselves populist or do not demur from that description imposed on them by others. This is important to note because populism's deeply embedded hostility towards elites and intellectuals means that self-describing themselves with a term that has great stigma for elites and intellectuals shows them to be populist, at least instinctively. It is a necessary part of being a populist to not see the label as negative.

There is a particular need in analysing populism to do so with the benefit of knowledge about many of its historical manifestations. The lack of a consensus about what populism is means that historical case studies give a necessary grounding that would otherwise be lacking. The fact that populism is episodic rather than omnipresent means that it is easier mentally to handle the important cases as there are not too many of them. Another reason for surveying populism is less practical and more theological. The chameleonic quality of populism allows us to use populism to illuminate the context in which it finds itself, but it also means that to understand populism in its wider sense we need to be aware of what are its environmental and what are its essential features.

The fate of populism as a concept and an object of study mirrors the history of populism itself. Populism has been studied episodically, coming in surges. This no doubt owes much to intellectual fashionableness but interestingly does not follow regularly from particular upsurges in populism as we might expect. The debate also is a very fractured one. Putting the pieces together is necessarily an unsatisfactory process because the different pieces have been fashioned for separate and distinct environments. It is crucial, if we want to understand representative politics and political ideologies, that we must be prepared to engage in this process. It is only if we have some understanding of populism that we can have a full understanding of representative politics.

Notes

1 For those who study culture and communication, the term 'populism' has been heavily used and has become central to the field of cultural studies. In this sense, it is used very specifically and has little in common with more political uses of the term which are the focus here. Cultural populism describes a position which privileges the culture that is consumed by ordinary people, rather than the 'high' culture as consumed by elites (McGuigan 1992: 1–5).
2 For a comprehensive overview, it is impossible to do better than refer to Canovan (1981).

2

Definitions of Populism

Populism serves many masters and mistresses. At different times and in different places it has been a force for change, a force against change, a creature of progressive politics of the left, the refuge of a measured defence of the status quo and a companion of the extreme right. Populists have been portrayed as dupes, democrats and demons. The term is used widely, but often defined narrowly. It is used to dismiss some proposal as too popular, or as popular with certain sorts of people (invariably the wrong sort). Attempts to identify a core of populism – something that runs through it in all its various guises – have left some writers with the clear sense that there is no clear sense to it (for example, Mouzelis 1985: 344; Taguieff 1995: 17, 25).

For such a commonly used term, it is surprising how little attention populism has received as a concept. Where it has been dealt with systematically, populism as a concept has found little agreement surrounding it. Like the emergence of populist movements themselves, attempts to capture the essence of populism have sprung up at different times and in different places, but it is very difficult to see a consistent pattern. Most have seen populism as specific to the context in which they are focused. The more ambitious have attempted to define populism in universal terms. Others have portrayed it as variegated – with no essence but with varieties.

The difference between contextual, universal and variegated approaches to defining populism is due, in part, to the different types of work that deal with populism. By definition, historical studies of particular manifestations of populism are contextual. Many contextual definitions of populism – including agrarian radicalism, Peronism, ideas of Social Credit and *narodnichestvo* – come

from the detailed study of one context. It is in the nature of a detailed and single-focus historical study that the larger implications may remain implicit. If there has been an explicit attempt at definition, even if it is contextual, then it is potentially generalizable if those implications are made explicit and systematically applied. We can always potentially develop our understanding of the concept by attempting to apply one contextual definition to another context. If we do this we find very quickly that many contextual definitions do not travel well, that the concept of populism (as opposed to its particular manifestation) is framed in terms that are too specific. On the other hand there are some studies of populism which are contextually derived and which make no attempt to be universal but which have developed conceptualizations of populism that travel far better.

In this chapter I address those studies which have explicitly attempted to generalize about populism (universalistic or variegated) or which are explicitly contextual but implicitly generalizable, to offer a survey of the 'state of the art' for students of populism.

The state of the art

Edward Shils gave a contextual definition of populism when he wrote in direct reaction to the McCarthyism of the United States in the 1950s. Seeing populism as multifaceted and as permeating Nazi dictatorship in Germany and Bolshevism in Russian, Shils suggests that populism 'exists wherever there is an ideology of popular resentment against the order imposed on society by a long-established, differentiated ruling class which is believed to have a monopoly of power, property, breeding and culture' (Shils 1956: 100–1). For Shils the key to understanding populism lies in the relationship between elites and masses. Populism is portrayed as deeply ambivalent in its attitude towards institutions – those of the state, universities, bureaucracy, financial institutions. Unsurprisingly, populism therefore fundamentally distrusts those peopling those institutions as not only corrupt but also as lacking in wisdom. Wisdom resides in the people and, in so far as political institutions identify with – not represent – the will of the people, politics is seen as legitimate (Shils 1956: 101–3).

The phenomenon of McCarthyism during the 1950s had an important effect on the academic debate about populism in the

USA, alarming many as to the dangerous possibilities of extremism. It was in this context that Shils was writing. After McCarthy there were a number of studies that sought to explore and explain the outburst of right-wing extremism in the USA (Lipset 1963; Bell 1963; Rogin 1967; Lipset and Raab 1971). Two orientations guided this set of writings. The first was that a lineage was traced between the People's Party and the ideas of the populist movement in that era and McCarthyism. Consequently, the previous populism was very much portrayed as being extremist, bigoted and backward. The second orientation of these studies was therefore a desire to establish the social bases of support for populism, to see if there was something particular about the type of people who had been drawn to this form of extremism.

bigot = Fanatiker

Shils later extended his analysis of populism to explain populism in Africa and Asia. He did so in an explicitly comparative fashion and suggests that populism results from the emergence of a global intellectual community and is therefore 'a phenomenon of the tension between metropolis and province which arises from the trend toward that world-wide intellectual community' (Shils 1962: 214). Drawing on the history of populism, he sees its roots as lying in German history with the rejection and critique of the rule of the state, the universities and the church authorities. In its place there was the belief in the 'folk' or the people. Drawing the parallels with populism in the USA and Russia to describe the populism of the intellectual elites in African and Asia, Shils argues that populism is characterized by oppositionalism.

Kornhauser drew on Shils's definition of populism for his own analysis of mass society. He argued that populism is both cause and effect in mass society, as it is the denial of plurality and the assertion of uniformity in the face of social differentiation (Kornhauser 1959: 103). Mass society therefore gives rise to populist democracy, which he contrasted to liberal democracy. Populist democracy involves direct participation of the people as a way of circumventing the institutions and associations of representation and also has the effect of taking away the liberty of the individual as the people, assumed to be monolithic, have the priority (Kornhauser 1959: 131–2).

Shils places a stress on the new conditions of a world-wide intellectual community and the knock-on effect this has on the relationship between elites and (particular) sections of society in particular national contexts. This reflects an underlying continuity in many

definitions of populism, that it is a reaction to modernity or to a particular feature of the modern world. And, although Shils's initial concern was with the USA, this focus on the twin strains of domestic relations between rulers and ruled, combined with relations between core and periphery in a more global setting, is one that has a natural resonance for those studying those parts of the world that find themselves on the economic periphery.

Torcuato Di Tella examines populism in Latin America but does so in a way that is explicitly comparative, especially with the European experience. In his earlier work on populism, Di Tella attempted to draw out different types of populism that occurred in Latin America as an illustration of how Latin American development was different from European development (Di Tella 1965). With the 1989 revolutions in Europe, Di Tella began to draw parallels between the Latin American experience and Eastern Europe (Di Tella 1997). Explicitly, Di Tella stresses that populism comes when there is an anti-status-quo motivation among middle-level elites, when rising expectations creates a mobilized mass of citizens and when the conditions allow collective enthusiasm among elites and masses (Di Tella 1965: 53). He defines it as 'a political movement based on a mobilized but not yet autonomously organized popular sector, led by an elite rooted among the middle and upper echelons of society, and kept together by a charismatic, personalized link between leader and led' (Di Tella 1997: 196). He argues that populism emerges in these conditions where social democratic parties would emerge in economically more developed countries (Di Tella 1965, 1997). Populism is therefore, for Di Tella, a function of the process of development of societies as they move towards modernity.

Implicitly, Di Tella stresses that populism is characterized by a sense of differentiation between those who are poor and those who are part of the elite and by the social characteristics of the supporting coalition. The sense of differentiation is important, but the attempt to characterize populism by the social make-up of populist movements inevitably limits the scope of populism because it has had some very different social bases in its various manifestations.

Di Tella emphasizes that a sense of differentiation occurs both between elites in less economically developed countries who compare themselves with elites in more developed countries, and between social groups and their sense of grievance at the status quo. These social groups are both the educated who feel that they

are unable to satisfy their aspirations and the uneducated mass whose low social status and poor living conditions foster a sense of grievance (Di Tella 1965: 52).

The difficulty of Di Tella's account of populism is that it assumes that societies find themselves on or move themselves along a fixed continuum of development. Implicit in it is the assumption of a single goal of modern development. This does not allow for fundamental variations that occur in both the nature of development and in the end point of societies. The second problem is that populism occurs in societies in which economies and societies are, in these terms, definitively modern. It is possible to see the USA as an almost paradigmatic example of populism (Kazin 1995). Populism is a recurrent feature in European politics. It is nonetheless a recurring characteristic of those who have come to the concept of populism from an interest in the Third World or Latin America, like Di Tella, to see it as a feature of societies at a particular stage of development (see also, for example, Malloy 1977; Germani 1978).

Many of the themes developed by writers focusing on the Latin American experience have had resonance for those studying politics in Africa and the Third World in general. Gavin Kitching places populism at the centre of his analysis of thinking about development. He argues that populism is a reaction to industrialization and is characterized by a championing of small-scale production and opposed to concentration of production (Kitching 1989: 19–22). It is therefore a heavily economistic analysis and particularly focused around peasant ideologies, and therefore he draws heavily on the Russian populists as the paradigmatic example of this sort of thinking.

The difficulty of Kitching's account of populism is that it is too specific. The concept of populism is developed to trace a continuity within a strand of thinking about political economy. The problem is not that this is imprecise, but that Kitching derives populism from what is developed and not from the impulse that causes this sort of thinking to develop. Populism is essentially a reaction to rule. In the context of agrarian peasant societies, this reaction will, if given political expression, crystallize into a set of ideas. However, it is in the reaction and not the development of that reaction that we find the essence of populism. Looking at Perón's populism, the concepts and ideas he developed had an essentially pliant quality, and this is testament to the impulse that gives rise to them. Kitching gives priority to the secondary characteristics of populism.

All populisms develop additional ideas, but these are not the ideas that make them populist.

Ghiţa Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, in organizing a conference at the London School of Economics in 1967, tried to bring together experts in the different manifestations of populism in order to draw out a more general theory. The conference involved 43 participants and the range of geographical areas covered was extremely wide and therefore potentially avoided the specificity of other attempts to theorize populism.

In the introduction to the book which came out of the conference and which remains *the* definitive collection on populism (Ionescu and Gellner 1969a), the editors say that it is an 'attempt to clarify the main aspects of a concept which during the nineteenth century and even more in the twentieth century has been more fundamental to the shaping of the political mind than is generally acknowledged' (Ionescu and Gellner 1969b: 5). They explicitly tackle the questions that need to be answered if populism is to be identified as a unified phenomenon. They ask whether populism can be considered an ideology, a recurring mentality brought about by similar conditions, a political psychology, an anti phenomenon (anti-capitalist, anti-urban, anti-Semitic), a pro-people phenomenon, or as a mentality absorbed by socialism, nationalism and peasantism (Ionescu and Gellner 1969b: 3–4). Despite their hopes, the resulting collection does not identify a core set of ideas common to populism, although it remains collectively a landmark study and does yield some important individual contributions.

In his chapter in the collection, Peter Worsley explicitly surveys populism in the USA, Russia, Africa, Asia and Latin America but comes to the conclusion that the only common aspects are of a high level of generality (by implication, of limited use) and that therefore populism 'is better regarded as an emphasis, a dimension of political culture in general, not simply as a particular kind of overall ideological system or type of organization' (Worsley 1969: 245). He returns to Shils's definition which stresses the importance of popular sovereignty and of direct contact between government and the people as the nearest his survey leads him to a common core (Worsely 1969: 243–6).

Confining himself to a 'Third World' variant of populism, Worsley is less general and suggests that it is characterized by four features. First, that societies are portrayed as essentially homogeneous, with only non-antagonistic divisions within them. This

means that politics is classless and that the indigenous society is 'natural', constituting a community. Second, the real conflict comes between the society or nation and the external world, especially colonial powers. Third, the community is expressed through one dominant party that fuses the ideas of community, society and nation. Fourth, the party becomes an agent of liberation and a force for economic development (Worsley 1969: 229–30, 1967: 165–7).

Emboldened by 'a lack of specialist knowledge', Peter Wiles outlines 24 features of populism as a syndrome (Wiles 1969). Populism is moralistic; of a certain style of appearance; dependent on extraordinary leaders; as an ill-disciplined movement, self-consciously loose in its self-definition; anti-intellectuals; anti-establishment; capable of ineffective and short-winded violence; class-conscious but conciliatory, avoiding class war; corrupted and bourgeosified by success; given to small-scale cooperation; supported by those of limited wealth; vigorously opposed to financiers; potentially less critical of large-scale productive capitalists; possibly urban (as well as rural); supportive of state intervention; opposed to social and economic inequality caused by institutions it opposes; in foreign policy particularly suspicious of the military establishment but isolationist in orientation; for religion but against the religious establishment; disdainful of science and technology; nostalgic; mildly racialist to a great extent; various (spanning pre-industrial, peasant anti-industrialism, farmer industry-tolerating); and not to be thought of as bad (Wiles 1969: 167–71).

In his attempt to sum up the overall sense of the discussion at the conference, Isaiah Berlin proposed that there was general agreement over six features of populism that applied across the different variants. The first feature is commitment to *Gemeinschaft* (approximately community), which gives rise to the idea of an integrated and coherent society. The second feature is that populism is apolitical in the sense that it is not interested in political institutions because it believes in society before it believes in the state. Populism is concerned with returning people to their natural and spontaneous condition to which they belonged before having been subject to some sort of spiritual collapse. The fourth element is that populism is past-directed, in the sense that it seeks to bring back ancient values in to the contemporary world. Berlin 'tentatively' adds to this list that populism, although referring to different versions of the people, always seeks to speak in the name of the majority. Finally, he suggests that populism emerges in societies undergoing or about to undergo modernization (Berlin *et al.* 1968: 173–8).

Ernesto Laclau (1977) puts forward a theory of populism which forcefully takes on its apparently contradictory and elusive nature, and which embodies a commitment to a Marxist account. He suggests that the attempt to generalize about populism, by working out what are the common features for a series of movements described as populist, is circular. To focus on the movements as populist means already knowing what populism amounts to. The outcome is to generalize about a series of movements that are essentially different (Laclau 1977: 145). Laclau starts his analysis of populism from the point that populism is fundamentally elusive as a concept and apparently contradictory. Laclau accounts for this in a complex way. He argues that the dominant ideas of a society, those that represent the thinking of the dominant or hegemonic class, will always, as an expression of their dominance, absorb other ideas and neutralize them by allowing their expression but only in a way that projects them as different but not as fundamentally antagonistic. In one sense, therefore, populism can be seen as the ideology of elites. This occurs when one fraction of the dominant class seeks to establish hegemony but is unable to do so and so makes a direct appeal to the masses (Laclau 1977: 173).

For Laclau, society must be accounted for in terms of contradiction between social forces that reflect partially the contradictions in the process of production. In simplified form, societies express class antagonisms. However, he sees that sometimes there is a wider conflict that does not accord with particular classes – the popular traditions of a society will reflect the wider concerns of popular masses who are not part of the dominant class and who are the subjects of rule. This is the conflict between the 'people' and the 'power bloc'. Ideas that call on the dominated classes in this respect are called popular-democratic ideas. When particular class antagonisms are expressed in popular-democratic forms, then populism occurs but it necessarily has, for Laclau, both a class form and a popular-democratic form. Put more simply, it speaks simultaneously for a class and for the 'people', even though they are not the same thing. This feature explains why populism is so elusive because conflict between 'people' and 'power bloc' is so pervasive and yet so different in its manifestations. Part of that difference will lie in the classes that mobilize against the 'power bloc', and

this explains why populism has historically been attached to such a range of classes.

Margaret Canovan (1981) offers the most ambitious attempts to get to grips with populism. Her work gives a variegated approach differentiating between agrarian populism and political populism. This covers the range of populist movements throughout history and across the world. Detailed consideration of these means that she breaks down agrarian populism into the populism of farmers, of peasants and of intellectuals. Comparing the rural radicalism of the US People's Party, the Canadian Social Credit movement in the 1930s and the German agrarian movement of the 1890s, she rejects the temptation to describe them as *sui generis* phenomena and traces lines of continuity. Those lines come, for her, in the demands of farmers for government intervention in the economy (Canovan 1981: 104).

Moving to the rural radicalism of the Russian *narodnichestvo*, and comparing this with Algerian, Tanzanian and Bolivian forms of agrarian socialism, Canovan draws out the common tendency for these forms of populism to oscillate between idealized deference for the peasantry and the need to provide leadership for this idealized group (Canovan 1981: 109). In these cases, she suggests that the role of elites in attempting to catalyse and mobilize the rural population means that this form of agrarian populism is effectively that of the intellectuals. It takes what Canovan describes as a different form of agrarian populism for the peasantry to unequivocally take centre stage. It is in the peasant parties of Eastern Europe which emerged in the early twentieth century and which grew into the Green Uprising that Canovan sees the peasant variant of agrarian populism. This movement in Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia after the First World War attempted to develop and implement ideas of voluntary cooperation between peasants with an emphasis on democracy, family property and an antagonism to the cities. Canovan suggests that there is enough overlap between these different types of agrarian populism to 'make intelligible the use of a single term' but not 'to unite all these movements into a single political phenomenon with a single ideology, program, or socioeconomic base' (Canovan 1981: 133).

An exclusive focus on agrarian populism misses much. As Canovan (1981: 136) suggests, it is therefore important to consider those parts of populism that are 'political'. She suggests that it needs to incorporate populist dictatorship, populist democracy, reactionary populism and politicians' populism. As soon as we consider Latin American examples of populism, it becomes clear that it cannot be considered as exclusively agrarian as they were urban movements with strong leaders invoking the wider 'people' (in practice a combination of the urban working class and the peasantry) in the name of reformist programmes. Moving north, Canovan brings into the same fold the politics of Huey Long, governor of Louisiana between 1928 and 1932 and US senator between 1932 and 1935. Long's appeal was based on his denunciation of the concentration of wealth in Wall Street, on his programmes of social improvement for Louisiana, but achieved through Machiavellian and strong-arm politics of deception. Like Perón, Long was a strong leader of the poor but there was nothing necessarily agrarian about his politics.

The second sense in which Canovan uses the term 'political populism' is to describe those sets of institutions that are associated with the practices of direct democracy. Out of the populist movement of the nineteenth century in the USA came the roots of what was the Progressive movement in the early twentieth century. Unlike the Populist movement and the People's Party, this movement was largely driven by ideas from above rather than being a genuinely mass movement. Like the populist movement, it distrusted the institutions of representative politics and sought to introduce mechanisms that bypassed the role of representatives through mechanisms such as the initiative, the referendum and the recall. Moves to supplement the US model of democracy with these institutions worked best in the West where they were building on the roots laid by nineteenth-century populism (Canovan 1981: 177). Implicit in the need to supplement democracy with these institutions is the assumption that representative democracy can overrepresent certain interests and that its institutions can become captured by powerful interests, so transforming benign representative institutions into levers of power for the already powerful. Canovan makes the comparison with Switzerland where the institutions of direct democracy are not so much additional institutional features, but rather integral parts of the governmental structure. The Swiss case illustrates that populist forms of democracy can yield a system which stresses decentralization and the extensive use of referendums to overcome a highly fragmented and segmented population and which produces a form of functioning democracy in difficult circumstances, and provides us with a model with which to

assess the 'virtues and defects of populist democracy' (Canovan 1981: 202).

The third form of political populism that Canovan suggests is that of reactionary populism. Canovan compares the case of George Wallace in the US state of Alabama with Enoch Powell in Britain. In 1968 Wallace, building on his record of protest against racial desegregation, stood as a third party candidate for the presidency while, in the same year, Powell made a speech in which he warned against the dangers of immigration for British culture. Both were united in making appeals that stressed the gap between the values of elites and those of the people, revealing 'a clash between reactionary, authoritarian, racist, or chauvinist views at the grass roots, and the progressive, liberal, tolerant cosmopolitan characteristic of the elite' (Canovan 1981: 229). What also united both politicians was that they were reacting against the apparent tide of progress. Canovan makes the point that this clash between progress and populism is heavily dependent on the context, on what is seen as 'progress'. In this sense populism, as a reaction to the prevailing dominant ideas, can be both reactive and yet rational. What is, in Canovan's terms, 'disreputable' can also be a reaction on the part of popular opinion to real conditions of hardship (Canovan 1981: 257–8).

The final type of political populism for Canovan is politicians' populism. This is a style of politics that plays on the ambiguity on who 'the people' are. In considering accounts of populism drawing on African experiences, it is clear that there are claims by some politicians to represent a unified people above and beyond divisions that otherwise cross their country. These are used to justify systems of one-party rule. In another sense, politicians also try and construct a unified people through creating cross-class or 'catch-all' coalitions. Jimmy Carter's successful campaign for the US presidency saw him using the populist imagery of the outsider, the honest farmer seeking office, while at the same time deliberately appealing to both liberal and conservative instincts in the electorate (Canovan 1981: 269–73).

Canovan, in outlining her seven categories, makes the point that no core to populism can be found, but rather we can identify a number of different syndromes. Bringing out the similarities across the seven types allows her to suggest that there are clusters of similarities around the 'populism of the little man', authoritarian populism and revolutionary populism (Canovan 1981: 291–2). She also

suggests that particular historical manifestations of populism can both combine and separate the categories (Canovan 1981: 293). The only common themes across all seven types are a resort to appeals to the people and a distrust of elites (Canovan 1981: 264), and the usefulness of this is limited at best (Canovan 1981: 298). Her conclusion is that populism is a term that is widely used and so it is important to provide some clarity, but that it incorporates a wide range of phenomena without a common core, and that therefore her attempt to provide a taxonomy is the only way to deal with this complexity.

A more recent attempt to theorize populism as a concept has come from the radical (and frequently iconoclastic) US journal of critical social theory, *Telos*. Although contributors have varied in their positions, it is possible to see a clear project of attempting to formulate populism as a concept, to fashion it as a tool for the development of the sort of critical theory with which the journal is associated. The core of the *Telos* position is that populism offers the best hope for a critique of, and alternative to, the hegemony of liberalism. The need for this alternative is heightened by the present crisis of 'New Deal' liberalism as exemplified in US society and politics, and by the disjunction between the 'New Class' of well-educated, professionalized, bureaucratized elites who have developed from the need to steer the technocratic tools of the new regulatory state and the traditional middle- and working-class support base for the New Deal politics. The *Telos* position shares my emphasis on populism as a reaction to liberalism (to the institutions of liberal democratic politics in my case). Specifically focusing on the misfit between elites in representative politics and the communities that give rise to them, *Telos* argues for the need to reinvigorate local politics and responsible individual participation in that politics, thus seeing populism as a potentially liberatory political project.

Taking the rise of the regional leagues (such as the Lega Nord) in Italy as an indicator of the broader applicability of their thesis, the journal has attempted to develop populism as the new route for critical theory's critique of liberalism, combining it with a radical democratic position. *Telos* has seen the possibility of the degeneration of populism into racism and a new exclusionary ideology, but views this as a potential danger rather than either essential to or inevitable in populism. Despite the attempt to examine the populist possibilities in Europe, it remains clear that the *Telos* concept

of populism, although well theorized, is really embedded in the US context. The importance of the particular constellation of liberalism in US political institutions ('New Deal liberalism'), as well as the explicit reference to the founding ideas of US democracy (see Piccone 1995), means that the *Telos* concept of populism is specific in both time and place to the United States in the post-Reagan era.

Surveying the state of the art on the conceptualization of populism *qua* populism brings out four clear features. The first is the relatively small amount of material dealing with populism as a concept. This is all the more surprising given the wide and popular use of the term. The second feature is that those conceptualizations that have attempted to be either conceptually bold or explicitly comparative have almost invariably carried the imprint of the contexts in which they were originally developed, and are therefore too narrow to help us develop a more universalistic conceptualization. The third feature is that the most explicit attempt to draw out a conceptualization by aggregating studies from an almost global span of case studies (Ionescu and Gellner 1969a) failed to deliver a synthesis of what was clearly an unparalleled range of scholarship and expertise. The final feature is that, in Canovan's (1981) work, the attempt to be both broad in scope and bold in conceptualization led to a conclusion that populism is essentially a fractured concept.

Note

1 For various articles and collections of articles representing the *Telos* position, see Anderson *et al.* 1991; *Telos* 1991, 1991–92, 1995a, 1995b; Piccone 1991. See also Lasch 1991.

PART ONE

Cases of Populism