

Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy

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Populism, understood as an appeal to ‘the people’ against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values, should not be dismissed as a pathological form of politics of no interest to the political theorist, for its democratic pretensions raise important issues. Adapting Michael Oakeshott’s distinction between ‘the politics of faith’ and ‘the politics of scepticism’, the paper offers an analysis of democracy in terms of two opposing faces, one ‘pragmatic’ and the other ‘redemptive’, and argues that it is the inescapable tension between them that makes populism a perennial possibility.

The populist movements that have in the past decade burst into mainstream politics in many Western democracies are usually treated as pathological symptoms requiring sociological explanation.¹ They are not seen as phenomena that challenge our understanding of democracy, and democratic theorists who are committed to increased popular participation in politics pay little or no attention to populist attempts to mobilize the grass roots. While this disdain may be understandable, it is too hasty. Populists see themselves as true democrats, voicing popular grievances and opinions systematically ignored by governments, mainstream parties and the media. Many of them favour ‘direct democracy’ – political decision making by referendum and popular initiative. Their professed aim is to cash in democracy’s promise of power to the people. This paper will argue that we cannot afford to brush these claims aside, and that reflections on populism’s disturbing recurrence in established democracies can help us to a better understanding of democracy’s complexities. The reason is that the sources of populism lie not only in the social context that supplies the grievances of any particular movement, but are to be found in tensions at the heart of democracy. I shall suggest that democracy as we know it has two faces – a ‘redemptive’ and a ‘pragmatic’ face – and that their coexistence is a

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¹ H-G Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe* (Houndmills, Macmillan, 1994), p. 4. The movements Betz covers are the *Front National*, the Austrian Freedom Party, the *Lega Nord*, the *Vlaams Blok*, the Swiss *Autopartei* and Tessin League, the German *Republikaner*, the Danish and Norwegian Progress Parties, and Sweden’s New Democracy. Other recent phenomena that are populist in the sense used in this article include Alberta’s Reform Party, Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party in Australia and the US presidential bids by Ross Perot and Pat Buchanan.

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constant spur to populist mobilization. My conclusion will be that instead of being a symptom of 'backwardness' that might be outgrown,² populism is a shadow cast by democracy itself.

What is Populism?

Before we can investigate populism's relation to democracy we need to make clear exactly what we are talking about, for 'populism' is a notoriously vague term. It has precise meanings in a number of specialist discourses, but attempts at a general theory have been problematic.³ The (ideal-typical) account given here is concerned with populism in contemporary democratic societies, where there is a good deal of agreement on which political phenomena fall into this category but less clarity about what it is that makes them populist. Clarification can, I believe, be achieved if we shift our attention from the ideology and policy content of populist movements and concentrate instead on structural considerations. Populism in modern democratic societies is best seen as an appeal to 'the people' against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society. This structural feature in turn dictates populism's characteristic legitimating framework, political style and mood. Each of these points needs some elaboration before we take up the paper's central theme.

Populism and Power Structures

It is generally agreed that populist movements are (as Paul Taggart puts it) 'of the people but not of the system'.⁴ They involve some kind of revolt against the established structure of power in the name of the people. Within democratic systems that often means an attack on the established parties.⁵ But anti-system mobilization is not enough by itself to identify populist politics, for that description would also take in the 'new social movements', generally acknowledged to be something else.⁶ The crucial difference is that while both are anti-system, populism challenges not only established power-holders but also elite values. Populist animus is directed not just at the political and economic establishments but also at opinion-formers in the academy and the media.

² T. S. Di Tella, 'Populism into the twenty-first century', *Government and Opposition*, 32 (1997), 187–200, p. 190.

³ For an ambitious recent attempt see D. Westlind, *The Politics of Popular Identity: Understanding Recent Populist Movements in Sweden and the United States* (Lund, Lund University Press, 1996). G. Ionescu and E. Gellner (eds), *Populism: its Meanings and National Characteristics* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1969) is a classic but dated survey of the variety of so-called 'populisms'. For a phenomenological approach that sorts the cases into types rather than attempting a general theory see M. Canovan, *Populism* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981); M. Canovan, 'Two strategies for the study of populism', *Political Studies*, 30 (1982), 544–52. In terms of the distinction developed there between 'agrarian' and 'political' populisms, the phenomena considered in the present paper fall into the 'political' group.

⁴ P. A. Taggart, *The New Populism and the New Politics: New Protest Parties in Sweden in a Comparative Perspective* (London, Macmillan, 1996), p. 32.

⁵ E.g. J. Haider, *The Freedom I Mean* (Pine Plains, Swan, 1995), pp. 104, 88.

⁶ Taggart argues that the 'New Politics' of the Green, pacifist and feminist movements is 'inclusive', whereas 'New Populism' is 'exclusive' of groups such as immigrants or welfare claimants. But practitioners of 'New Politics' may themselves seem exclusive of a benighted mainstream alarmed by elite concerns, as Taggart himself admits. (*The New Populism*, pp. 33, 35).

When Jean-Marie Le Pen of the *Front National* claims to 'say out loud what people here are thinking inside', in defiance of the Parisian and European elite, his move is highly characteristic of populism as it appears within formally democratic systems.⁷

Populism understood in this structural sense can have different contents depending on the establishment it is mobilizing against. Where economic policy is concerned, for example, populists in one country with a hegemonic commitment to high taxation to fund a generous welfare state may embrace an agenda of economic liberalism,⁸ while other populists elsewhere are reacting against a free market hegemony by demanding protectionism and more state provision. This does not in itself demonstrate (as is sometimes claimed) that populists are either unprincipled or confused: merely that what makes them populist is their reaction to the structure of power. The values that are populist also vary according to context, depending upon the nature of the elite and the dominant political discourse. Where (as in modern Western democratic countries) elite political culture is strongly imbued with liberal values of individualism, internationalism, multiculturalism, permissiveness and belief in progress, populism is bound to involve more or less resistance to these, and can at times amount to a relatively coherent alternative world-view. In that sense it may be argued that there can be such a thing as a populist ideology.⁹ But attempts to *define* populism in terms of any such ideology fail, because in another context the anti-elitist mobilization concerned may be reacting to a different ideological environment. In his illuminating account of 'the populist persuasion' in American history, Michael Kazin observes that what he calls a 'language' of populism was for over a century an inspiration to movements that were decidedly radical and often clearly on the Left. It was only in the 1940s that American populist discourse 'began a migration from Left to Right'¹⁰ that pitted 'the people' against a new liberal elite. In both cases, what was involved was the mobilization of interests and opinions that were perceived by their adherents as being neglected by those in power despite being the concerns of the mainstream.

Appeals to 'the People'

Populism is not just a reaction *against* power structures but an appeal *to* a recognized authority. Populists claim legitimacy on the grounds that they speak for *the people*: that is to say, they claim to represent the democratic sovereign, not a sectional interest such as an economic class. Although economic grievances are always important to populist movements, these are

⁷ J. Marcus, *The National Front and French Politics* (London, Macmillan, 1995), p. 54. For other recent examples see P. Manning, *The New Canada* (Toronto, Macmillan Canada, 1992), p. 2; 'Pauline's people', *The Weekend Australian*, 17–18 May 1997, review section, p. 1.

⁸ For Scandinavian examples, see Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism*, pp. 42–47, 110–2; Taggart, *The New Populism*, p. 34.

⁹ For versions of such an ideology see C. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics* (New York, Norton, 1991) and P. Piccone, 'From the New Left to the New Populism', *Telos* 101 (1994), 173–208. On a foretaste of the same themes earlier this century see M. Canovan, *G. K. Chesterton: Radical Populist* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977).

¹⁰ Kazin, *Populist Persuasion*, p. 4. A more theoretical account of populism as a political discourse can be found in Westlind, *The Politics of Popular Identity*.

translated into political questions of democratic power.¹¹ This claim to speak for 'the people' is far from straightforward, for the term is ambiguous and populists tend to be adept at exploiting its rhetorical possibilities. For the sake of clarity we can identify three different senses that figure in populist discourse, though they tend in practice to be blended together.¹²

One facet is an appeal to the *united people*, the nation or country, as against the parties and factions that divide it. A typical example is the slogan, 'United We Stand', used by Ross Perot in campaigning for the US presidency. A vision of 'the people' as a united body implies impatience with party strife, and can encourage support for strong leadership where a charismatic individual is available to personify the interests of the nation. Merging with this stress on unity, though in some ways at odds with it, is the appeal to *our people*, often in the sense of our ethnic kith and kin. Where the previous appeal is integrative (at any rate in form), this one is divisive, distinguishing our people from those who do not belong – alien immigrants, for example. This is an aspect of populism that alarms liberal commentators, as when the *Front National* calls for '*priorité aux Français*' in the allocation of jobs, housing and social welfare. To suppose, however, that populists are simply right wing is to ignore the egalitarian impulse expressed in a third variety of appeal to the people: mobilization of what used to be called 'the common people'¹³ but would now be better called '*ordinary people*' against the privileged, highly educated, cosmopolitan elite. Populists in established democracies claim that they speak for the 'silent majority' of 'ordinary, decent people', whose interests and opinions are (they claim) regularly overridden by arrogant elites, corrupt politicians and strident minorities.¹⁴ Experience casts doubt upon the populists' claim to represent the mass of the people, since their campaigns rarely get anywhere near attracting a majority of votes. But their use of all these various forms of appeal to the people underlines the extent to which they rely upon a framework of legitimacy provided by notions of popular power: an idea of democracy, in other words.

The Populist Style of Politics

Populist appeals to the people are characteristically couched in a *style* that is 'democratic' in the sense of being aimed at ordinary people. Capitalizing on popular distrust of politicians' evasiveness and bureaucratic jargon, they pride themselves on simplicity and directness.¹⁵ When members of the political establishment are accused of adopting 'populist' tactics, one of the relevant pieces of evidence is their willingness and ability to communicate in this tabloid style. But simple, direct language is not enough to mark a politician as populist unless he or she is prepared also to offer political analyses and proposed solutions that are

¹¹ For an analysis of Chartism in similar terms, see G. S. Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History 1832–1982* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 96–100.

¹² Cf. M. Canovan, '"People", politicians and populism', *Government and Opposition*, 19 (1984), 312–27.

¹³ Apparently this terminology survives on the Canadian prairies. Principle 14 of the 'Statement of Principles' issued by the Reform Party in 1991 states, 'We believe in the common sense of the common people'. Manning, *The New Canada*, p. 361.

¹⁴ On the 'silent majority', see Kazin, *Populist Persuasion*, p. 252. For a contemporary European analogue see Haider, *The Freedom I Mean*, p. 68.

¹⁵ For examples, see Manning, *The New Canada*, p. 123; 'Pauline's people', p. 1.

also simple and direct. Populists love transparency and distrust mystification: they denounce backroom deals, shady compromises, complicated procedures, secret treaties, and technicalities that only experts can understand.¹⁶ The politics of coalition-building is evidently open to populist attack on these sorts of grounds,¹⁷ while European Union politics is a sitting duck.¹⁸ Populists claim that all this complexity is a self-serving racket perpetuated by professional politicians, and that the solutions to the problems ordinary people care about are essentially simple.

The Populist Mood

Populism's fundamental structural characteristic, popular mobilization against the political and intellectual elites, implies not only a direct, simple, style but also a characteristic *mood*. Populist politics is not ordinary, routine politics. It has the revivalist flavour of a movement, powered by the enthusiasm that draws normally unpolitical people into the political arena.¹⁹ This extra emotional ingredient can turn politics into a campaign to save the country or to bring about a great renewal. Associated with this mood is the tendency for heightened emotions to be focused on a charismatic leader.²⁰ Personalized leadership is a natural corollary of the reaction against politics-as-usual. Rejecting ossified institutional structures, including bureaucratic layers of organization, populists celebrate both spontaneous action at the grassroots and a close personal tie between leader and followers.²¹

Observers looking back to the rise of Hitler and other fascist leaders (and further back in history to the traditional association between mass politics, demagogues and 'Caesarism') have often associated populism with dangerous manipulation by the leader and alarming irrationality on the part of the led.²² But while these analyses must carry weight, we should resist the temptation to write off populism in general as a pathological symptom. Our focus in this paper is on populist movements within mature, well-established democratic systems. These movements do not propose to abolish free elections and install dictatorship, while their admiration for the Swiss system of popular initiative and referendum is hard to construe as a dangerous symptom of tyrannical tendencies.²³ In other words, we need to think seriously about the populist claim to

¹⁶ Cf. Westlind, *The Politics of Popular Identity*, p.203. E. Shils, *The Torment of Secrecy* (London, Heinemann, 1956), is an extended attack on this aspect of populism.

¹⁷ Cf. R. S. Katz and P. Mair, 'Changing models of party organization and party democracy', *Party Politics*, I (1995), 2–28, especially p. 24.

¹⁸ J. Hayward (ed.), *The Crisis of Representation in Europe* (London, Frank Cass, 1995).

¹⁹ Kazin, *Populist Persuasion*, p. 16 and *passim*.

²⁰ Taggart, *The New Populism*, pp. 2, 37. On the populism of George Wallace see Kazin, *Populist Persuasion*, pp. 221–42.

²¹ Westlind, *The Politics of Popular Identity*, pp. 106, 177.

²² Betz, *Radical Right-wing Populism*, p. 4. These charges are discussed in Canovan, *Populism*, pp. 158–69. See also Di Tella, 'Populism into the twenty-first century', pp. 196–7; A. Bozoki and M. Stükösd, 'Civil society and populism in the Eastern European democratic transitions', *Praxis International*, 13 (1993), 224–41.

²³ Haider, *The Freedom I Mean*, p. 106. Swiss experience shows that such devices cannot be simply equated with populism. Cf. K. W. Kobach, *The Referendum: Direct Democracy in Switzerland* (Aldershot, Dartmouth, 1993); W. Linder, *Swiss Democracy: Possible Solutions to Conflict in Multicultural Societies* (New York, St. Martin's, 1994).

democratic legitimacy.²⁴ Unless we do so we will miss the opportunity to learn important lessons about the nature of democracy itself.

Is Populism Democratic?

As we have seen, populists seek to mobilize the electorate against established power-holders and opinion-formers. On the face of it, appealing to the grass-roots in this way looks like a democratic thing to do; after all, the referendums and popular initiatives favoured by populists are universally referred to within the literature of political science as 'direct democracy'.²⁵ Definitions of democracy are highly contentious, and contemporary theorists tend to shy away from talk of popular sovereignty. But it can hardly be denied that notions of popular power and popular decision are central to democracy.²⁶ Why then, are not populists acknowledged as the true democrats they say they are? How is it that they can be often seen as dangerous to democracy: all the *more* dangerous, indeed, in so far as they get popular support?

One answer regularly given to this question is that democracy as we know it is *liberal* democracy and that populism is dangerous because it is illiberal. On this view, what makes liberal democracy vulnerable is that the relationship between its two aspects 'is both one of mutual necessity and a source of tension or antagonism'.²⁷ Beetham (whose words these are) stresses that many aspects of the liberal heritage are actually fundamental to the persistence of democracy itself, among them freedom of expression and the rule of law. Nevertheless he concedes that liberal principles also place restraints on democracy, and that there is room for dispute about the precise terms of the trade-off between the two. Other theorists have suggested that 'populist democracy' is a version uninhibited by these liberal constraints, and given (in particular) to a crude majoritarianism that neglects or overrides the rights of minorities.²⁸

A second way of relating populism to democracy is to emphasize the inevitable gap within the latter between ideal and reality, promise and performance. This view has been developed with considerable subtlety by Sartori.²⁹ But

²⁴ Cf. Westlund, *The Politics of Popular Identity*, p. 209.

²⁵ I. Budge, *The New Challenge of Direct Democracy* (Cambridge, Polity, 1996); T. E. Cronin, *Direct Democracy: The Politics of Initiative, Referendum and Recall* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1989).

²⁶ B. Holden, *Understanding Liberal Democracy* (New York, Philip Alan, 1988), p. 5. For a defence of the view that democracy really does mean majority rule arrived at by the most direct means possible, see I. McLean, *Democracy and the New Technology* (Cambridge, Polity, 1989).

²⁷ D. Beetham, 'Liberal Democracy and the Limits of Democratization', in D. Held (ed.), *Prospects for Democracy, Political Studies*, Special Issue, XL (1992), 40–53, p. 41.

²⁸ R. A. Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1956), pp. 4–6, 34; W. H. Riker, *Liberalism Against Populism: A Confrontation between the Theory of Democracy and the Theory of Social Choice* (San Francisco, Freeman, 1982), *passim*. The post-war generation of political scientists were preoccupied with the danger populism posed to liberalism to the point of elaborating what came to be called (by its critics) 'the theory of democratic elitism'. For examples, see G. Sartori, *Democratic Theory* (Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1962), pp. 72–128; S. M. Lipset, *Political Man* (London, Heinemann, 1960), pp. 97–130; Shils, *The Torment of Secrecy*, pp. 98–104; W. Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), pp. 227–30. The classic critiques are P. Bachrach, *The Theory of Democratic Elitism – a Critique* (Boston, Little Brown, 1967); C. Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1960).

²⁹ G. Sartori, *The Theory of Democracy Revisited* (Chatham, NJ, Chatham House, 1987), Vol. I, pp. 7–8, 12, 46, 81. See also N. Bobbio, *The Future of Democracy* (Cambridge, Polity, 1987), pp. 8, 26–7.

neither of these responses to populism is wholly satisfactory. The first analysis, stressing the tensions within 'liberal democracy', seems to imply that however weak populists may be as liberals, they do get full marks on the democracy section of the paper.³⁰ The second also seems to imply that *ideal* democracy would coincide with the populist's dream, though democratic practice cannot live up to it. In the remainder of this paper I shall present a different analysis of democracy's complexities that builds upon these insights, but that will (I believe) shed more light on the problematic relation of populism to democracy, and perhaps more generally upon the phenomena of modern democracy. My central claim will be that democracy as we know it has two faces, which I shall call its 'redemptive' and its 'pragmatic' faces, and that populism thrives on the tension between the two. We will need to step aside briefly from the topic of democracy in order to lay some foundations for this analysis.

Redemptive and Pragmatic Politics

In seeking to place democracy within a wider framework of thinking about contrasting styles of politics, I shall draw on the work of Oakeshott. He is best known for his critique of 'rationalism' in politics and as a defender of the limited style of politics that he characterized as 'civil association'.³¹ But although his own preference for restrained, aristocratic politics is unmistakable, his most elaborate works of political thought rise above partisan sympathies to acknowledge that the conflicting strands within modern politics are also complementary: that the state as 'enterprise association' could never be wholly displaced by 'civil association', nor sceptical politics by 'the politics of faith'.

It is this last contrast that concerns us here. In an essay published after his death, Oakeshott argued that for the past five hundred years the politics of Europe had been marked by a tension between two political styles, a tension that had affected both the theory and the practice of government, leaving us with a deeply ambiguous political vocabulary. These two styles he termed 'the politics of faith' and 'the politics of scepticism'. Within the former, politics is taken to be a matter of achieving perfection or salvation in this world. Salvation may be understood in religious or in secular terms, but in either case the assumption is that governmental action can bring it about. The politics of faith therefore entails mobilization of popular enthusiasm behind this enterprise, a quest for increased power to accomplish it, and confidence that such power can be safely entrusted to human beings. Devotees of this political style are impatient of legalistic restrictions that may stand in the way of salvation.

The politics of scepticism, by contrast, is suspicious both of power and of enthusiasm, and has much lower expectations of what governments can achieve. For its supporters, politics has no overriding purpose, except to keep order and reduce occasions for conflict by maintaining and amending the precious inheritance of rights and institutions. For this style of politics, the rule of law is crucial.³²

³⁰ Cf. Iain McLean on the Salem witch trials: 'If the decision to burn witches came after discussion and majority vote, I call it democratic'. *Democracy and The New Technology*, p. 36.

³¹ M. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London, Methuen, 1962); *On Human Conduct* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1975).

³² M. Oakeshott, *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 21–38.

No reader of the essay can be in any doubt where Oakeshott's sympathies lie. Nevertheless he makes a point of stressing that the two styles as he presents them are abstractions from a concrete practice that is really much more mixed.³³ Furthermore, he concedes that both styles are indispensable. Unchecked by scepticism, the politics of faith undermines itself through its totalitarian aspirations, but 'without the pull exerted by faith . . . government in the sceptical style is liable to be overtaken by a nemesis of political quietism'.³⁴ No doubt he is better at seeing moles in the eye of faith than beams in the eye of scepticism; furthermore, he argues that since the mood of modern politics is biased toward faith, anyone concerned with the balance of the ship of state must put his weight on the sceptical side.³⁵ Nevertheless, the central thesis of his essay is that despite the tensions between them, the two styles are inseparable in modern politics.

This analysis can, I believe, shed light on a number of obscure areas of political experience. In particular, I shall argue that we can gain a better understanding of democracy as a phenomenon, and especially of its vulnerability to populist challenge, if we see it as a meeting point for two contrasting styles of politics. Since I propose to build upon Oakeshott's distinction rather than to adopt it as it stands, I shall rename these contrasting styles, calling them 'redemptive' and 'pragmatic', and our next task will be to consider how democracy looks when it is approached in each of these ways. Before we leave Oakeshott, however, we should take note of a curious and significant implication of his way of mapping the political spectrum. The 'sceptical politics' of the essay we have been considering has an obvious affinity not only with the politics of 'civil association' depicted in *On Human Conduct*, but also with 'attending to arrangements' within a tradition of behaviour, as described in *Rationalism in Politics*. It may be, then, that their opposites also have much in common, and that (despite appearances), 'rationalism' and 'faith' are not so very far apart as bases from which to conduct politics. I shall suggest later that there is an important insight here, and that 'redemptive' democracy is hospitable to a romanticism that shades on the one side into populist rhetoric while on the other sustaining rationalist utopias. Our immediate task, however, is to place democracy within the theoretical framework we have been exploring and to clarify the implications of doing so.

Democracy's Two Faces

Drawing on these ideas about the two styles of modern politics and the systematic ambiguity of political concepts marked by those two styles, we can, I believe, understand modern democracy (idea and phenomenon) as a point of intersection between redemptive and pragmatic styles of politics. In this section I shall argue that democracy presents two faces, one redemptive, the other pragmatic; that although these are opposed, they are also interdependent; and that between them lies a gap in which populism is liable to appear.

In shorthand, one could caricature democracy's pragmatic face with the slogan, 'ballots, not bullets', or (in more academic terms) as 'a system of

³³ Oakeshott, *The Politics of Faith*, pp. 21–2, 30, 38.

³⁴ Oakeshott, *The Politics of Faith*, p. 108.

³⁵ Oakeshott, *The Politics of Faith*, p. 128.

processing conflicts without killing one another'.³⁶ A corresponding caricature of its redemptive face might be '*vox populi vox dei*', or 'government of the people, by the people, for the people'. Note that the difference and tension between the two faces does not correspond to the tension (discussed earlier) between liberalism and democracy, for liberalism itself has both a redemptive and a pragmatic face.³⁷ Neither is it equivalent to the tension (noted by Sartori) between democratic ideals and realities. Crucially, the pragmatic face of democracy itself embodies political ideals (notably peace, stability, moderation)³⁸ which are different from the guiding ideas of redemptive democracy. In order to make clear what the distinction does involve I will indicate three aspects of the contrast which I will then examine in more detail.

(1) Democracy is a redemptive vision, kin to the family of modern ideologies that promise salvation through politics. Pragmatically, however, it is a way of coping peacefully with the conflicts of modern societies by means of a highly contingent collection of rules and practices.

(2) The notion of popular power lies at the heart of the redemptive vision: the people are the only source of legitimate authority, and salvation is promised as and when they take charge of their own lives. But from a pragmatic point of view democracy is simply a form of government, a way of running what is always one particular polity amongst others in a complex world.

(3) Pragmatically, democracy means institutions: institutions not just to limit power, but also to constitute it and make it effective. But in redemptive democracy (as in redemptive politics more generally) there is a strong anti-institutional impulse: the romantic impulse to directness, spontaneity and the overcoming of alienation.

Later I shall argue that the two faces of democracy are a pair of squabbling Siamese twins, inescapably linked, so that it is an illusion to suppose that we can have one without the other. But the tensions between them are very great, and it is these tensions (I shall suggest) which provide the stimulus to the populist mobilization that follows democracy like a shadow. Let us look now in more detail at these three specific tensions, and at how each of them helps to generate populism. I shall zigzag back and forward between the redemptive and pragmatic perspectives, partly for ease of exposition, but also to avoid the impression that one perspective is fundamental and the other secondary.

(1) From the pragmatic point of view, democracy is essentially a way of coping peacefully with conflicting interests and views under conditions of mass mobilization and mass communication. Its great virtue is that it is an alternative to civil war or repression. Bobbio puts this view well when he speaks of a democratic state as 'a state founded on a non-aggression pact among different political groups and on their stipulation of a set of rules permitting the peaceful solution of any conflict that may arise among them'.³⁹ It involves some local

³⁶ A. Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 95.

³⁷ J. Gray, *Post-liberalism: Studies in Political Thought* (London, Routledge, 1993), p. 327.

³⁸ Cf. Bobbio, *The Future of Democracy*, p. 41; D. B. Magleby, *Direct Legislation: Voting on Ballot Propositions in the United States* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 181.

³⁹ N. Bobbio, 'Democracy and the International System', in D. Archibugi and D. Held (eds), *Cosmopolitan Democracy: An Agenda for a New World Order* (Cambridge, Polity, 1995), pp. 17–41, p. 33.

variant of a highly contingent collection of institutions and practices (evolved out of the particular traditions of representative government that grew up in certain Western European countries and their overseas offshoots) that have found ways of making power relatively accountable, widening the range of interests incorporated into the political arena and binding more of the population into the political system. From this point of view, democracy means multi-party systems, free elections, pressure groups, lobbying and the rest of the elaborate battery of institutions and practices by which we distinguish democratic from other modern polities.

For many of those around the world who have to put up with civil war or violent repression, pragmatic democracy may seem supremely enviable. But to those who take its benefits for granted, democracy would not seem legitimate if there were nothing more to it than this. For democracy is also a repository of the aspirations characteristic of modern politics. Inherent in modern democracy, in tension with its pragmatic face, is faith in secular redemption: the promise of a better world through action by the sovereign people. This face of democracy has a glory round it. Compared with other modern vehicles of political salvation, democracy is relatively unarticulated. It carries with it much less by way of a vividly imagined utopia than most forms of socialism; it is not often sustained by the quasi-historical myths that feed nationalism, while for rationalistic ideology it cannot compare with liberalism. Nevertheless, democracy is crowned with a halo of sacred authority, and it is hard to see how it could function effectively without this. Pragmatism without the redemptive impulse is a recipe for corruption. Consider, as an example, the key institution of elections. At the purely pragmatic level, a general election is a nonviolent way of distributing political power. At the same time, however, it is also a ritual of democratic renewal, and unless that ritual is taken seriously by a substantial proportion of voters and politicians, democratic institutions are weakened. If it becomes clear that those involved see in democracy nothing but horsetrading, they, and eventually the system itself, are liable to lose their legitimacy. When too great a gap opens up between haloed democracy and the grubby business of politics, populists tend to move on to the vacant territory, promising in place of the dirty world of party manoeuvring the shining ideal of democracy renewed. Even from the point of view of pragmatic politics, the vital practices of contestation and accountability grow weak without the energy provided by democracy's inspirational, mobilizing, redemptive side.⁴⁰

(2) It can be plausibly argued, then, that at least some degree of redemptive democracy's promise of salvation is actually necessary to lubricate the machinery of pragmatic democracy, and that if it is not present within the mainstream political system it may well reassert itself in the form of a populist challenge. But the indispensability of that promise itself creates the next contradiction on which populism feeds. For the content of democracy's redemptive promise is power to the people; we, the people, are to take charge of our lives and to decide our own future. Unfortunately this promise is in deep and inescapable conflict with democracy viewed in the cold light of pragmatism, and the gap between the two is a fruitful breeding-ground for populist protest.

⁴⁰ Cf. C. Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society* (Cambridge, Polity, 1986), p. 279; C. Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory* (Cambridge, Polity, 1988), pp. 17–9.

This second ambiguity concerns the contradiction between the power and the impotence of democracy. On the one hand, democracy is an ideal of popular sovereignty. But (to quote Ralf Dahrendorf's deflating comments on the popular revolutions of 1989) 'democracy is a form of government, not a steambath of popular feelings'.⁴¹ In other words, it is also a way of running a polity among other polities in a complex world. The promise is that in a democracy we will be able to have some significant degree of control over important issues that affect us. But even supposing that 'we, the people' can combine our diverse interests and opinions into a coherent collective will,⁴² the hard facts of political and economic interdependence often make that an empty promise. This ambiguity affects democracies regardless of their scale, and cannot be avoided either by participatory democracy in face-to-face communities or by the global democracy now projected in some quarters.⁴³ At the level of nation-states it is most conspicuous as a yawning gap between the claim that a democratic government represents the people and its very limited ability to ensure their economic well-being.

It is natural for voters in a democracy to suppose that if they elect a government to represent them, that government should look after their interests. It is equally natural for politicians to promise voters that they will do so. After all, as we have just seen, without the sense of democratic renewal – of a fresh start that will really make a difference – it is hard to stop elections degenerating into unalloyed corruption. But governments cannot in fact control economic conditions, and in bad times democratic systems are vulnerable to populist reactions. The original American Populism of the 1890s provides a classic example. Farmers in the American West and South were in dire economic straights, despite the fact that they had an elected government. Not surprisingly, they were responsive to the message that the political establishment was not looking after their interests because it had its own agenda. To populists, the answer was plain. Get rid of 'the plutocrats, the aristocrats, and all the other rats',⁴⁴ install the people in power, and all would be well.

Since the 1890s this sort of response to the ambiguity of democratic power has recurred again and again in hard times. If the government is the people's government, why isn't it looking after the people? Because it is in the hands of corrupt politicians, millionaires, Jews, tools of the IMF, politically-correct patrons of immigrant workers, and so on: the answer is to elect a people's government that will sack those who are feathering their own nests, send the immigrants home, or whatever the local remedy happens to be at a particular time. In so far as populism exploits this gap between promise and performance in democracy, there is no end to it. For if a populist movement is so successful in appealing past the established political forces that it actually gets into power, its own inability to live up to its promises will be revealed, offering scope for further populist appeals to the people.

Where this aspect of democracy's ambiguity is concerned, it is easy to see why populism is often seen as a travesty of democracy, perhaps posing dangers

⁴¹ R. Dahrendorf, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe* (London, Chatto and Windus, 1990), p. 10.

⁴² On the problems involved see Riker, *Liberalism Against Populism*, *passim*.

⁴³ Archibugi and Held, *Cosmopolitan Democracy*.

⁴⁴ Quoted in N. Pollack, *The Populist Mind* (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), p. 337.

to the whole system. As always with democracy, however, the situation is ambiguous, and 'realism' can itself be simplistic. For redemptive democracy's promise of power is not entirely illusory: it really is the case that people who can manage to believe in the possibility of collective action and to unite behind it can exercise more power than if they give up and concentrate on their private affairs. Popular movements have often demonstrated the truth of this, while one of the reasons for the comparative power of some states and the weakness of others is the presence or absence of this kind of collective political will. In many polities, potentialities for power are dissipated for *lack* of shared faith in redemptive democracy. Unrealistic visions may be a condition of real achievements as well as being a recipe for disappointment. Democracy, it seems, is obliged to face in two opposite directions at the same time.

(3) A third aspect of the tension between redemptive and pragmatic aspects of democracy concerns democratic institutions and the alienation to which they inevitably give rise. Clearly, in so far as democracy's promise of popular power is made good, this can be done only through institutions that make that power effective and lasting.⁴⁵ But entwined with the redemptive strand of democracy is a deep revulsion against institutions that come between the people and their actions, and a craving for direct, unmediated expression of the people's will. There is a strain of romanticism here, invoking the living voice of the people and their spontaneous action.

It is important for democratic legitimation that the polity be seen as being in some sense an expression of the people: that (whatever we may think of the incumbent government) the state is our state, not something altogether alien to us.⁴⁶ Where this is not the case, the pragmatic ability of democracy to resolve political disputes without violence is damaged. Most schemes for improved versions of democracy aim to reduce alienation by bringing the polity closer, making it something more expressive of the people. The trouble with that agenda is that democratic government means institutions. It is hard to see what could make Britain's Inland Revenue, Department of Social Security, or even Parliament itself feel like the expression of popular will. Institutions like these recall Marx's analysis of capital as the alienated labour of the worker, experienced by him not as the expression of his free creative powers, but as an alien object dominating him.⁴⁷ Democracy can be a very powerful form of government insofar as it does have the legitimacy of being recognised as **our** government. But to work as a government, it has to take institutional forms that are very far removed from spontaneous popular expression. As Beetham observes, 'democracy as a method of government is not whatever the people at a given moment may happen to decide, but a set of arrangements for securing their control over the public decision-making process on an on-going basis'.⁴⁸ No wonder, then, that there is always scope for an appeal from the people's institutions to the people's will or to their spontaneous action.

⁴⁵ S. Holmes, *Passions and Constraints: On the Theory of Liberal Democracy* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 8, 163–4, 167.

⁴⁶ D. Beetham, *Legitimation of Power* (London, Macmillan, 1991), pp. 94, 132–4.

⁴⁷ K. Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), p. 69.

⁴⁸ Beetham, 'Liberal Democracy and the Limits of Democratization', p. 42.

Consider for example a topic that agitates populists in many Western states, the place of criminal justice in a democracy. In institutional terms democratic justice means arrangements to secure to all citizens the equal protection of the laws. In other words, the popular sense of justice must be mediated through the rambling by-ways of due process of law. But the outcomes of legal due process and equality before the law often conflict with the spontaneous popular sense of justice. This leaves ample room for populist mobilization of the living popular will against the dead letter of the law. Liberals who fear populism are visited by nightmarish visions of demagogues inciting lynch mobs to direct action, or popular tyrants sweeping aside legal formalities.

Where this aspect of redemptive democracy is concerned, there may be an analogy with Weber's celebrated analysis of religious institutions. In Weber's terms, a church is an institution in which religious charisma is routinized. Its hierarchy and rituals are legitimized by divine authority, but the *Vox Dei* is mediated through them. As a result it is always vulnerable to challenge by direct appeal to divine authority. The charismatic preacher leading a grass-roots revival hears the voices of God directly, by-passing the hierarchy and rituals of the church – until his message becomes routinized in its turn and the cycle starts again.⁴⁹

The place of populism in democracy is in some ways similar. Populists appeal past the ossified institutions to the living people, proclaiming the *vox populi* unmediated. As we saw earlier, such movements often have more or less charismatic leaders, vivid individuals who can make politics personal and immediate instead of being remote and bureaucratic. In this context, amateurism and lack of political experience actually become recommendations. There is of course an irony here: the preference for direct personal representation over elaborate mediating institutions itself gives the leader of a populist movement a degree of personal power that is hard to reconcile with democratic aspirations. In a sense, therefore, this romantic populist appeal is short-sighted, for democracy cannot in fact function without alienating institutions and professional expertise. Nevertheless it could also be argued that (like routinized religious institutions in Weber's analysis) democratic institutions need an occasional upsurge of faith as a means of renewal. In cases where radical populist mobilization against a *partitocrazi* leads to the formation of new parties or to a reform of the institutional structure, democracy may indeed be regarded as a self-correcting system in which both aspects play their part.⁵⁰

Populist and Participatory Radicalisms

I have argued in this paper that reflections on the radical populist mobilization that haunts even the most firmly established democracies can alert us to an inescapable ambiguity in democracy between redemptive and pragmatic aspects, and a tension between its two faces that cannot help but encourage populism. It should be noted, however, that populism is not the only kind of

⁴⁹ M. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (London, Methuen, 1965), pp. 46–79.

⁵⁰ V. Bogdanor, 'Western Europe', in D. Butler and A. Ranney (eds), *Referendums Around the World: the Growing Use of Direct Democracy* (Houndmills, Macmillan, 1994), pp. 24–97, p. 69; Budge, *The New Challenge of Direct Democracy*, pp. 103–4. Cf. B. Ackerman, *We the People: I: Foundations* (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1991).

radicalism that flourishes in this gap. For many of the themes of populism are eerily familiar to any contemporary political theorist. Where else have we come across furious revulsion against pragmatic party politics and its compromises? Where else schemes for returning democracy to the grassroots and empowering the people? Where else calls for transparency and directness in the relation between popular will and democratic act, for the overcoming of alienation? Where but in the theories of participatory democracy that emerged out of the radical movements of the 1960s and have dominated philosophical discussion of the subject ever since?⁵¹

It may be objected that radical democratic theory and populist rhetoric have nothing in common, and that it is outrageous to link them together. Not only do populists specialize in action, rarely attempting deep thought, but their characteristic style is a mixture of homespun common sense and emotional appeals, whereas radical democratic theorists put rational deliberation at the heart of their theories. Remember, though, that (within the Oakeshottian framework) 'rationalism' is as far from pragmatic politics as is 'the politics of faith', and can be plausibly analysed as a version of the latter. There is certainly a large dose of redemptive faith intermingled with the rationalism of most theories of 'deliberative' or 'discursive' democracy: faith in the transforming power of deliberation, and faith that if the people at the grassroots were to be exposed to it, their opinions would be transformed in the correct (antipopulist) direction.⁵² Whilst most such theorists would hesitate to empower the people as they are now (with views revealed by opinion polls and mobilized by populists),⁵³ their aim is to put into effect the wishes of the people as they will be when they have been informed and enlightened by deliberation in face-to-face assemblies.⁵⁴

This is not the place to explore the piquant affinities and contrasts between those Sartori calls 'perfectionists' and 'politicos',⁵⁵ both of whom are happiest gazing on democracy's redemptive face. More directly relevant, perhaps, are attempts instead to bring into theoretical prominence the pragmatic aspect of democracy. For a good deal of recent writing about democracy is disenchanted. Post-Marxism and post-modernism, some democratic theorists explicitly seek to strip democracy of all redemptive features and to emphasize its non-messianic side. This is democracy without foundations, democracy as open-ended political practice, democracy of which we should not expect too much.⁵⁶ But the implication of the analysis presented above is that any attempt to banish the

⁵¹ Kazin, *Populist Persuasion*, pp. 195–8; N. Birnbaum, 'What can we learn from the movements of 1968?', *Constellations*, I (1994), 144–57.

⁵² Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, pp. 42–4; B. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1984), pp. 119, 152–4, 232, 237; J. Dryzek, *Discursive Democracy: Politics, Policy and Political Science* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 119–20; Fishkin, *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1991), p. 81.

⁵³ Cf. Cronin, *Direct Democracy*, p. ix.

⁵⁴ E.g. Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, pp. 42–4; Barber, *Strong Democracy*, pp. 119, 152–4, 232, 237; J. Fishkin, *Democracy and Deliberation*, p. 81.

⁵⁵ Sartori claims that 'the perfectionist ... gives credibility to the demagogue'. *Theory of Democracy Revisited*, I, p. 82.

⁵⁶ Cf. C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London, Verso, 1993), pp. 4–6, 145; J. Keane, 'Democracy and the Media – Without Foundations', in Held, *Prospects for Democracy*, 116–29, pp. 123–6; M. Warren, 'What should we expect from more democracy?', *Political Theory*, 24 (1996), 241–70; M. Saward, 'Postmodernists, pragmatists and the justification of democracy', *Economy and Society*, 23 (1994), 201–16.

redemptive aspect of democracy is likely to be self-defeating. As a way of interpreting democracy it is rather like trying to keep a church going without faith. In politics as in religion, loss of faith tends to lead to corruption and surrenders the ground to revivalism.⁵⁷

Conclusion

I have argued that reflections on populism illuminate the inescapable ambiguity of democracy. The tension between its two faces is a perpetual invitation to populist mobilization. But attempts to escape into a purely pragmatic interpretation of democracy are illusory, for the power and legitimacy of democracy as a pragmatic system continues to depend at least partly on its redemptive elements. That always leaves room for the populism that accompanies democracy like a shadow.

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⁵⁷ Cf. Oakeshott, *The Politics of Faith*, pp. 108–13.