WHAT THUCYDIDES CAN TEACH US ABOUT POPULISM

Impromptu reflections in memory of Geoffrey Hawthorn

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Abstract:
This working paper consists of some mostly extempore remarks on the question of populism, liberal democracy and so-called post-truth politics. It cheerfully adapts some of the insights of the Greek historian Thucydides to indicate that - contrary to a great deal of political opinion-mongering today - populism is hardly a novel problem of contemporary liberal democracies, whilst conceding that its current variants, and especially some of its right-wing varieties, may be none the less disturbing for all that.
WHAT THUCYDIDES CAN TEACH US ABOUT POPULISM

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As we all know there’s a lot of populism about these days. We have had Brexit, Johnson, Farage, then Donald Trump, plus Victor Orban, Milos Zeman, and then there’s Putin and Erdogan – difficult to say if the latter two are populists exactly but they seem to be part of the same moment as the others. Then we had Berlusconi, Le Pen senior then Le Pen junior… plus latter-day leftist populisms or quasi-populisms; Syriza, Podemos, Corbyn. Opinion is divided as to what to make of this, though there is no shortage of opinion itself – much of it masquerading as expertise (indeed nowadays there suddenly seem to be even more experts on populism than there are populists – an irony if ever there was one, given the typical populist loathing of all experts.) Critics like Jan-Werner Muller (2016) warn against assuming that populism is one thing. He is right. But is there anything specific to the current wave? One thing is that populism isn’t fascism. There’s quite a bit of authoritarianism about a lot of rightist populisms of course, but none that could be described as unequivocally fascist or even probably heading that way (the Front National, if anything, seems to be going in the opposite direction) and perhaps that is what is significant about most of the current batch, that they attempt broadly speaking to stay within the rules of the game of modern liberal democracies. Neither Boris Johnson nor Jeremy Corbyn is about to dismantle the British state and don military fatigues. Trump is a populist, but – like Corbyn – he’s captured an existing party apparatus rather than invented a new one or come from nowhere with a previously marginalised one. Populism these days seems to be for the most part inside rather than outside liberal democracy.

There are different explanations for all this, dividing broadly into the economic and the political. One common, usually broadly Marxist, theory of populism holds it to be an ambivalent effect of capitalist crises; populism is a sign of crisis, but also potentially of renewal (see for instance Laclau 2014). It’s not a bad thing in itself, so far as many even on the left are concerned, since liberal democracies tend to be very narrow in terms of political possibility and populisms – or, anyway, leftist ones – can at least gesture towards an authentic so-called ‘progressive’ agenda. A common view is that the current wave is all to do with globalization, and this is a view shared by some of the populists themselves, Trump for example. Globalization, the story goes, has done wonders for some people, notably the already-rich and possibly – on some arguments, for instance those of Barack Obama – the global poor, but has done bad things for the traditional working classes; hence blue-collar Trumpism, and during the US election Bernie Sanders’ (and then Hilary Clinton’s) hostility to the Trans Pacific Partnership, Brexit hostility to the EU in parts of the north of England and so on.

It would be stupid to deny the element of truth in this kind of narrative, and no-one should be surprised that global free trade has generated kick-backs in the form of protectionist movements and nativist resentment in all sorts of places globally. But this doesn’t actually explain the seeming generality of the phenomenon (far transcending the significant pockets of disimherited working class voters) nor necessarily why it should take a specifically populist
form (demagoguery, hatred of elites, paranoid fantasies about heteronomy, the fatuous rhetoric of ‘taking back control’, fear and loathing of the Establishment). Brexit for instance could be in part about globalisation; and many have said that it is, but globalization cannot explain the particular populist character it’s taken as a mode of protest. For that we need to resort to political explanations. Populism isn’t itself a regime-type, rather there are spectra of populisms that cling to different regime types, but it does represent a kind of critical imaginary about government and politics (Molyneux and Osborne 2017). All populists are sceptical, to say the least, about the norms of liberal democracy. Indeed, it’s probably true to say that the generality of populisms has something to do with a crisis in the governability of liberal democracies, and no doubt this in itself has something to do with globalization and the undermining of infra-national political parameters even though that isn’t the whole story.

One way of thinking about populism politically is to observe that liberal democracies are in some ways contradictory kinds of enterprise. They are made up of liberalisms plus democracy; and democracy and liberalism, we know, don’t always go together. Hitler was the product – amongst other things – of a democratic election, but he wasn’t exactly a liberal. Brexit was a democratic ‘decision’, but not assuredly a liberal one (however the term is defined). What populists tend to dislike about liberal democracy is in fact the liberal bit – not so much the democracy part but the basic principle of representation. We have here a kind of ‘democracy of suspicion’ whereby the apparatuses of representation (the parliamentary system, the parliamentary ‘class’, the elite, their pet ‘experts’ and so on) are subject to populist hostility, precisely for not being representative enough or not in the right way. In fact, populists tend to dislike representation per se; they don’t understand it: they want power to be immediately expressive, without mediation; they want the sort of power that the great German political theorist Wilhelm Hennis called ‘the principle of identity’ – the fantasy of unmediated power (Hennis 2009). All populist think that democracy should be as direct as possible, so long as it’s their democracy. Representatives, populists think, tend to become a closed shop – a self-serving elite (‘they’re all the bloody same’, the ‘Westminster cabal’); they don’t do what they are told to do by those who elect them but seem to think they have some kind of independence of judgement, they tend to jabber amongst themselves without straightforwardly getting things done. Political representatives in the liberal system are sayers not doers. Those who chatter tend to be over-earnest and over-tolerant of others (‘bloody liberals’), not sufficiently caring about the interests of the very people who made them representatives. Populists tend to hold that representatives, ludicrously, think of themselves as independent adjudicators of decision in their own right, not as mere envoys from those who elected them.

Of course this sort of populist dislike of liberalism and representation tends to come most often from the right. But there is also the fantasy of unmediated power coming from the left. One sees this in particular in Latin American variants of populism over the past 50 years or so. But there are also versions closer to home. Corbynism for instance is largely a fantasy derived from the principle of identity. Liberal politics, it’s perfectly true, tends to pitch things towards the middle ground. Some on the pro-populist left regard political movements like Corbynism as at least shifting debate from that boring central ground, even if they don’t end up winning.
The point, anyway, is not that there’s anything new about populism; nor even that it is necessarily pathological (whatever that would mean). Rather, it’s part of any liberal democracy to have populist elements; Blair blathering on about the people’s princess was part of New Labour but not necessarily the worst part. As Muller says, populism is the shadow of democracy. Some degree of it is inevitable, even (possibly) desirable. The point is rather that if there is more populism about at the moment it is because the liberal aspect of liberal democracy – its powers of representation and decision – is in crisis in a new way; and we could speculate about the causes of this – globalisation, yes, but also no doubt factors such as the decline of realistic alternatives to liberal democracy, and also the pusillanimity of those who govern us in not defending the principles of representative government themselves. We have not stood up enough for the principle of representation as a value over and above fantasies of direct democracy, not just as a necessary second-best to it (that would be Rousseau) but better and ultimately more democratic; and better precisely for the sorts of reason adumbrated by Hennis; that political office is a trust and necessarily so and that the purpose of representative government is to ‘protect the people from harm’, to protect the _salus populus_ such that there is an implicit contract where the people devolve the tasks of government onto those they trust so as to protect their interests not just in factional terms – populism is always factional – but as a whole, something which always requires deliberation, balance, compromise rather than the fantasy of the pure decision. Had there been the courage to acknowledge this – that this is how liberal democracies basically (in Bernard Williams’s terms) ‘make sense’ – there would have never been a Brexit referendum – a deeply anti-democratic device if there ever was one.

Brexit also showed up something else about populisms, or a great many of them – their rather particular attitude towards the truth. We have heard quite a bit of talk recently of a post-fact or post-truth politics, but actually it can be argued that populisms embody a particular kind of truth-telling of their own. They are not post-truth, so much as embedded in a different kind of attitude towards the truth. The best guide to all this is actually the classical Greek historian Thucydides from the 5th century BC, probably the first theorist of populism and almost certainly the best (Thucydides 2013 edition). Recourse to Thucydides serves to show that populisms of various kinds are as old as democracy itself. Thucydides was one of the first to describe the structure of populism as a form of political discourse when he narrated the behaviour of Cleon over the Myteline episode during the Peloponnesian war. Cleon loathed the Athenian nobility – they were the elite, the establishment. And Cleon was a populist. He persuaded the Athenians to order the slaughter of the inhabitants of Myteline in 427 BC having defected from the protection of the Athenians; the Athenians in the Assembly then had second thoughts and decided, on reflection, not to carry out the slaughter; but Cleon, the demagogue, persuaded them to stick to the original, ruthless plan – and indeed in 425 over a thousand Myteline citizens were executed. The account in Thucydides is useful because it is not simply dismissive of populism; Thucydides seems to dislike Cleon intensely but he doesn’t seem that surprised by him, nor particularly alarmed by the fact that he is a demagogue. It’s Thucydides’s cool sense of understanding that is useful here. The logic of populism in his account can be summarised in four basic stages that still apply today. These are the principles of straight talk; the moral goodness and vulnerability of the people; the ruthlessness and
fearlessness of the enemy; and stalwart leadership that makes the people see that their own goodness can be its own worst enemy.

The first principle says that it’s the others who use rhetoric, not us. We – we populists – take a no-nonsense view of things and we talk straight. Don’t listen to fancy speeches says Cleon to the Athenians: “You have got used to listening to being the spectators of words and listening to deeds”. That is a marvellous sentence and quintessentially populist. It’s parallel to the contemporary critique of the derided liberal élites: they just talk and don’t get things done. We, however, talk straight. Now, perhaps this doesn’t sound like populism, which is after all known for its connections to rhetoric and demagogy, but actually it’s easy to see that most populisms do in fact project themselves as doers rather than talkers. This is Donald Trump saying (and saying again and yet again): we’re going to build a wall. With his very inarticulacy, he is signalling (if, of course, not actually saying), that it’s not about speech, folks, it’s about getting things done. This, anyway was Trump on the campaign trail. When I get into the White House, folks, we’ll sort it out. We’ll be great again. Everything will be beautiful. Those who criticized Trump for not developing policy get things wrong: policy is for liberals, policy is about talk; doers just get on with it. We all know what’s got to be done: we’ve got to keep out the Mexicans, rip up the Transpacific Partnership and probably a host of other things that don’t even need mentioning – don’t worry, leave it to me, I’m a doer, I’ll sort it out. Plenty of politicians use this sort of get-things-done rhetoric, even if they are not out and out populists. Margaret Thatcher, for instance; although she put it in gender terms – “if you want something said, ask a man; if you want something done, ask a woman”. Even Corbynism follows this logic in a way. A cynic would say (with some justification...) that Corbyn doesn’t need any policies as such; doing for Corbyn is simply about holding onto a moral position regardless of the (political) consequences. It’s just a different conception of what ‘doing’ is. Brexit, too, is saturated with this discourse. Just get on with it, Brexit is Brexit... Or as an audience member on Question Time said: “why can’t we just leave now?”

The second principle is that the people (whoever they happen to be) are morally good, benign, generous and – at least in what could be called leadership populisms – sometimes their own worst enemies as a result. Our enemies, populists say, are taking advantage of our goodwill and generosity. The doctrine of popular simplicity, of “naivety” in a strong moral sense, is integral here. According to Thucydides, Cleon says that: “a lack of learning combined with a sense of responsibility is of more general benefit than undisciplined smartness; and that unsophisticated people are... better at managing cities than their intellectual superiors.” The people may be a bit dim, even on their own account, but they are good, simple, honest. (And if they do bad things it’s only because they have to in order to clean up society – one does bad things for altruistic reasons, as even the followers of someone as ghastly as Duterte in the Philippines might possibly argue...) The smart people are the problem. Down the centuries echoes the loathing of learning, of expertise, of any kind of intellectualism that seems to be absolutely central to just about all populisms. Come on, they say, those people may know a lot but that’s not the point is it, and you the people are so vulnerable to them, because of your goodness, they’ve even convinced you that climate change is happening and is down to us but we all know (as a populist columnist once sagely observed) “you can’t change the weather”. Experts, clever people, they may know the facts, but that’s not really to know how
things actually are, for there’s a deeper truth, the truth of common sense, and we all know it; all of which means that being cavalier with the facts is not necessarily a cynical enterprise (to do with lying in any straightforward sense) but is simply the result of the fact that for populists facts are things that are thrown at us on the surface, objects of suspicion. But it’s important to see that this view is as old as democracy itself; it’s not the product, as some have argued, of our disreputable postmodernism, the betrayal of truth by Bruno Latour or whoever – it’s a valorisation of something like a ‘people’s truth’ over the mere facts themselves.

The third principle is that you, the people, have to realize that your enemies and opponents are not so generous as you are; they’re having a laugh at your expense, and they will take advantage of you the minute they can; for they are ruthless and fearless whereas we are nice, too nice. (And if we are ever ruthless and fearless – the Duterte logic again – then that is because our enemies are ruthless and fearless so it’s not our fault.) Cleon tells the Athenians that he understands that they want to be lenient and let the Mytelines off without a full-scale massacre, and that’s good (in a moral sense) that they are lenient, but they have to understand that the Mytelines themselves, and anyone else who wants to resist Athenian hegemony, will only laugh at them for it. The problem was that we were too nice to the Mytelines in the first place and so they had nothing to fear and so felt they could do what they like: “our enemies”, says Cleon, “are not people with legitimate fears; they’re just people who are taking advantage of our goodwill and sense of justice”. In fact Cleon is harsh on the people’s love of justice; we have to be hard-headed and realize that other people won’t give us justice so we had better not give it to them. So he flatters them for their goodness but tells them not to be so good. Massacring the Mytelines will show who’s boss and deter others, and that has to be for the best, since our very survival is at stake. Hence in the history of populism, the demonization of those who are vulnerable: migrants, refugees, Mexicans – of course we sympathise with them (morally), and of course it would be just to do more, but it will only be playing into their hands and so they wouldn’t do the same for us... Brexit was very much about this, and Trump is absolutely all about it. And the migration crisis: we all sympathise with what’s going on but let’s face it if we let these people in some of them will be terrorists, and anyway they’ll swamp us with their values which aren’t our own (Farage basically). It may seem harsh to pin this sort of thing on Corbyn, however, but that is because Corbynism isn’t really a leadership populism (one might say, if only it were!) – for Corbyn the people (or those who support him so feverishly) are intrinsically good and they don’t really need benign correction by strong leaders; which is to say that Corbynism isn’t a leadership populism but a moral populism, which is to say largely an anti-political one.

Fourth, at least for leadership populisms this means that only tough-mindedness will work, not indulgence; and the leader’s role is often to lead the people to see that they must be tough even though their good nature and sense of moral justice may lead them to hold back. The leader has to show that actually our enemies will respect us more if we are tough with them. “It is in any case human nature to despise those who indulge you and respect those who stand up to you.” Our enemies will respect us for our cruelty! This may sound extreme but it’s not always that way; this is Boris Johnson, for instance, saying that the Europeans will think much more of us for standing up to them and leaving the EU than they would if we remained. They’ll thank us for it! But the point about populist leadership is that it is about
lovingly and indulgently correcting the people’s better nature. Note that in all this, there is some difference between the fascist and the populist leader. As Theodor Adorno wrote (in his great paper on Freudian theory and fascist propaganda), the Fascist leader is superior, indifferent; in a sense he doesn’t even love his people (hence the masochistic element in the followers of fascism) (Adorno 1991). The populist leader, on the other hand, is certainly loved by them but he generally loves them back; he sees their interests better than they do, but he typically addresses them as ‘my friends’ (Boris Johnson) and sees himself as on their level. Populism, then, is narcissism all round; it’s basically a love-in, and that’s the point.

Now, taxonomies are generally to be avoided, but the Corbyn example does suggest, as already noted, some sort of distinction between leadership populism and moral populism, or perhaps between realist (political) populism and idealist (anti-political) populism. In realist populism, the leader is there to lead the people from their better nature (Trump on the campaign trail: listen, of course we want to keep all the muslims here because we’re good people, but we have to find out what the hell is going on first, and keep them out until we know) whilst keeping them good and sustaining their narcissism; in idealist populism, the leader accepts the people as they are and then is responsible simply for holding that position. For Corbyn the fact that his movement is a social movement is a good thing; for Labour supporters who think Labour should be a political movement it is not. Cynics would say, of course, that there is always a compensation effect involved in idealist, identificatory leadership of the Corbyn variety; behind the idealism and the good intentions there are usually apparatchiks, fixers and doers, the Stalinist back room boys behind the benign populist front. No doubt, behind every Jeremy Corbyn there is no doubt the equivalent of a Seamus Milne.

Now all this seems to lead in a number of directions. The first thing is simply to say that populism has been with us for a long time, is on a spectrum and that one will rarely if ever find it in its pure form (whatever that might be). Populisms are always hybrid, especially when they come to power – for then they inevitably have to make all sorts of compromises with existing political arrangements (as we are about to find out with Trump). It is not that populism has taken the place of other political ideologies for the simple reason that populism isn’t a single political ideology; rather it’s an effect of power, a vision of power where there is no room for mediation or mere ‘representation’, the anti-liberal fantasy of the principle of the identity of power (see on this Riker 1982).

This means that the idea that we are somehow in a post-fact society cannot be quite right. That suggests too much of an abrupt change and the point about much of what has been said here is to undermine that. There has been perhaps an intensification of populist discourse but not a sea change in the circumstances of how things are done. It cannot be quite right, for another thing, because we were surely never in a society where politics did follow the facts in any unequivocal way: since Machiavelli we have known that lying can pay in politics, and politicians and others have known it too. But yet there is something to the idea; though perhaps we shouldn’t say ‘post-fact’ but ‘non-fact’. For it is not, alternatively, that populists do not lie and not even that they do not lie more than others; it is rather that lying – the facts
– has, as we have seen, a different kind of meaning for them. Here is a well-known quote from Donald Trump from the campaign trail in 2015.

“I made a beautiful speech. I thought it was wonderful. Everything was fine. A week and a half later, they attacked me. In other words, they went through – and they lied. They made it up. I’m talking about illegal immigration... We have to stop illegal immigration. We have to do it. We have to do it. Have to do it. And when I hear some of the people that I’m running against, including the Democrats, we have to build a wall, folks. We have to build a wall. All you have to do is go to Israel and say how your wall working? Walls work!”

Mark Thompson, who quotes this excerpt in his recent book on post-fact politics (2016), observes that it entails examples of parataxis, a classic demagogic technique involving the juxtaposition of statements that are not necessarily connected to each other (in contrast to hypotaxis, where they are). This is giving Trump a little too much rhetorical credit. What’s at stake here is not so much parataxis but relentless repetition without much evident, underlying logic (build a wall, folks...). The effect of this is to infer that the audience knows what the speaker is saying even though he doesn’t actually say it (ambiguity, meaningless repetition and space for semantic inference is a classic populist technique, whereas Fascist demagogues tended to spell things out); in other words, affirming the narcissistic identity of speaker and audience. But more importantly, it’s a performance of the redundancy of mere language to capture the demands of the day; the message is that language isn’t enough, we need doers not articulate speakers. Nor is this really about being post-truth. Other people lie, of course, but not Trump: he just tells it how it is. He gave a speech and then people lied about it. He’s as much against lies as anyone else. Of course! But the inarticulacy is performative; it is demonstrating, signalling, the redundancy of mere speech; which means that the function of speech is not informative but affective. Truthfulness is, then, for most populisms a phenomenon of affect more than of denotation, or the mere facts – so in that sense as long as you are making the point you want to make, which the people all know (we have to leave the EU, we have to build a wall...), the exact facts, the exact form of mere speech, mere talk, doesn’t really matter. The Brexit battle bus... To liberals this was a lie. It was a) a false figure and b) entirely unrelated to any specific policy proposals (no one put forward any serious plan for exactly how and what would be “refunded” and to where). Boris Johnson and the others shrugged this off. Were they saying that it didn’t matter that they had lied, or that okay it wasn’t quite the right figure but that the principle was right? Perhaps it was neither; perhaps it was more that the exact figure was an irrelevance; that what mattered was the principle that the EU was co-opting “our” money not this or that figure, or more generally just signalling, performing, the populist truth that they are who they are and we are who we are. Let’s take back control!

None of this means that the battle bus figure wasn’t in fact a downright lie. It’s more a question of what kind of lie it was; what it seems we have here is more a case of the overt lie, again suggested by Adorno. In fascist propaganda, the lie is so blatant as to be redundant as a lie; everyone knows it is a lie so in a sense it is not a lie, since no one is trying to deceive anyone that it is factually true. The important issue is not the truth or falsity of the mere fact (facts belong to experts, and we know what we think about them); the important point is the
truthfulness of the speaker to resonate with populist truth. Bernard Williams (2002) defined truthfulness as entailing a balance of sincerity and accuracy; populism sacrifices accuracy for sincerity – but, then, sincerity is more important because it is that which registers one’s closeness to the people. The populist leader has the courage of truth (he always tells I how it is) to such an extent that it doesn’t even matter if as part of the truth he happens to tell lies in a narrow sense. All of which means that exposing the lies that populists make, though important in itself, is not really the point for the populists themselves and it won’t do much good in terms of resisting populism; for which we would need to regenerate some kind of principle of the ‘care of the truth’, in some or other form different from the current detachment between statements of evidence and statements of ‘populist truth’ that we find in most populisms. But that is a very large issue.

A penultimate, more local point, continuing with the topic of Brexit. Referenda are of course populism’s dream, but referenda do impose, thankfully, different kinds of obligation and restriction on truth-telling than does the normal run of liberal democratic politics. The UK referendum, in any case, was not conducted on party lines and this itself had consequences for how people could manipulate the facts. Those who made the battle bus claim could be conveniently disowned by their colleagues on the Leave side (Farage disowned it for example) because there was no pressure to hold a party line. The Leave campaign was more a coalition, actually a kind of rump. But this was the source of their effectiveness; Leave campaigners could free-ride on the lies without necessarily owning them. That is much more difficult to do in the context of party politics. We often complain about parties, but at least parties (sometimes!) confer the obligation to be responsible for what one says; and parties of course have to relate facts to programmes and policies. The Leave campaign didn’t need programmes or policies; all they needed to do was campaign for people to say no. Of course, all these are further reasons why referenda are deeply problematic devices of decision, but there might be small comfort in realizing that the dire standards of debate that were in evidence during the campaign whilst throwing some rather ghastly light on the norms of politics as usual were not themselves politics as usual. Liberal democracies, even those in crisis, usually (hopefully?) hold politicians to account better than that.

None of this, though, is to be sanguine about populism. And none of it isn’t to say that some populisms aren’t downright dangerous, even terrifying (Duterte, Trump in some incarnations) as well as either just casually ridiculous (Boris) or just politically feeble (Corbyn). It’s rather that populisms are to democracy as the poor are to Christendom; in liberal democracies they will always be with us to some extent. The antidote to them is not to retreat, however, from liberal values but to return to those values, re-assert them, re-configure them. Above all, what’s needed is a re-affirmation of the representative principle precisely as the best means of accomplishing truly democratic decision across the political community (for populisms are always partial and generally, to say the least, exclusionary) (see Urbinati 2006). In this sense, populism itself isn’t the problem; or at least the problem isn’t just populism. The starker, deeper problem is in the crisis of legitimacy of representation in liberal democracies. That is what needs to be fixed.
References


