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Populism in Western Democracies: A View from France

Bernard Boëne*

Abstract

Drawing upon the extensive literature on populism that has accumulated since the 1960s, this article first tries to characterize contemporary Western populist movements (I). It then details the key points of one of the most penetrating analyses of populism – E. Laclau’s *On Populist Reason* (II) –, with a view to using it in a perspective other than its author’s own (III). Having identified “civic” nuances among populist currents of the Left as well as of the Right, and in between them a moderate populist vote expressing disenchantment with government parties, it hypothesizes (on the basis of secondary analysis of existing studies) that the centre of gravity of the populist nebula in the West resides in a reference to the *demos*, rather than *ethnos* or *plebs*, and that the balance of forces within the populist support base is in its favour. It goes on to probe the causes of growing citizen alienation – the main source of populism. It suggests (based on fifteen unstructured interviews) that while the social aspect – the destabilization of the lower-middle classes induced by the neo-liberal order – is important, it does not exhaust the issue (IV). One reason is that the audience of populist themes is much wider than that central segment of societies; another is that social demands only serve to trigger protests, and are soon followed by institutional demands to remedy a perceived disenfranchisement of majorities that has come about over the last half-century due to the rise of culturally-defined minority groups, accommodated by ruling and expressive elites. The ensuing “tyranny of minorities” has resulted in multiple everyday life constraints and reduced freedoms for the many, generating more frustration than meets the eye (V). The same result is achieved when citizens are treated as minors by a “framed democracy” in which their capacity for discernment is deliberately ignored, and their assent dispensed with, by ruling elites in the name of a presumed higher moral good, or directives from unelected faraway power centres (VI). The root cause of the malaise that has set in is the ascent of individualism and relaxation of citizenship norms from the 1960s onwards, which has led to a situation where authority and power are questioned or feared, and political leadership becomes weak. Now reduced to a managerial role, it takes to accommodating activists and militants, delegates policy-making to independent, nonpartisan authorities, expert committees or international organizations, and thus becomes unresponsive to the will of majorities, which (because they had hitherto been passive) it does not fear to ignore or manipulate. In reaction, majorities first went through a phase of apathy (which saw abstention rise), then started resorting to protest votes. Elite deafness or impotence has eventually led to a third stage, in which majorities are now abruptly reasserting their power and demanding a reaffirmation of citizenship. The current surge of populism bluntly informs us that the outer limits of the master-trend initiated in the 1960s have now been reached. Seen in that light, “civic” populism is a response to a deactivation of democracy rather than a threat to it (VII). Systems of representative democracy, put in place over two centuries when the masses were uneducated, are not aging well now that average education have considerably increased and majorities want to make themselves heard. Should that demand be ignored, the problem raised would become structural – and more acute : institutional reform in the direction of redefining the relationships between elites and grassroots, majority and minorities, is thus in order – the sooner the better (VIII).

Keywords

Populism ; Western democracies ; Laclau ; social consequences of the neo-liberal order ; citizenship ; general will ; Rousseau ; tyranny of minorities ; elites ; framed democracy ; weak political leadership ; demands for institutional reform.

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The ambition to define and fathom populism has generated a considerable, steadily increasing literature since at least the 1960s – long before the powerful wave that is stirring up many States today and has placed populist leaders in power in some others. Yet to say the least, despite some analytical brainwaves here and there, the conceptual fog that has long prevailed on the subject is not entirely dispelled. The reasons for this are that the perimeter of phenomena that can be classified under the “populist” label is uncertain at best, and that within this perimeter their manifestations are obviously very diverse. Such diversity, which partly stems from their sensitivity to geographic and historical contexts, deprives us of the possibility to treat the variant forms of populism in a way that encompasses them all: attempts at broad generalization seem doomed to fail.¹

A more modest starting point is to outline the problem and its settings in ideal-typical fashion by specifying the conditions that commonly govern the emergence and development of populist, i.e. anti-elite, protest movements. For that purpose, four contextual criteria deserve attention. The first is that they are inseparable from democratic or at least republican environments: without large numbers of disgruntled *citizens* who feel dispossessed of one or more of their legitimate attributes, there is no populism – only protests or revolts on the part of subjects, serfs or slaves; the second is that they emerge in contexts of prolonged anomie: without malfunctioning institutions, there is no populism either, since it would then be deprived of immediate grounds for mobilizing, of wider support, and political prospects; thirdly, populist movements are apt to arise either from below (in which case they direct their anger at ruling elites, and tend to be led by political outsiders) or from above (as when mainstream leaders in office seek to secure their grip on power and to that end rely on popular animus to target social or economic elites opposing their policies at home, or much-maligned external power centres placing constraints on their rule); last, due to the radical solutions they frequently have in mind to remedy institutional malfunctions, such movements *may* harm democratic or republican principles by paving the way for illiberal options of which they often (though not *always*) are the bearers.

There is unfortunately no way the analyst can go much further without delving into what is common to specific categories of cases provided by the various periods and places in which populisms have been observed.² If that is so, a choice of particular focus has to be made: the scope of this article will be restricted to contemporary Western democracies.

¹ The difficulty involved in providing a *general* definition of populism was recognized over fifty years ago. A conference held on this topic in 1967 at the London School of Economics (which brought together such distinguished minds as Isaiah Berlin, Ernest Gellner, Richard Hofstadter, Kenneth Minogue, Alain Touraine, or Franco Venturi) came to the conclusion that no simple answer could be given to the question: “[E]veryone agreed that the subject was too vast not merely to be contained in one ‘definition’, but to be exhausted in one discussion”. Cf. “To Define Populism”, *Government & Opposition*, vol.3, n°2, 1968.

² From ancient Greece and its “demagogues” and the ancient Rome of the Gracchi and Clodius all the way to the populist movements and leaders of today, and in between: the United States of the 1830s and 1890s, Boulangism in early Third Republic days, then the shopkeepers’ and craftsmen’s anti-tax movements of the 1950s and 60s in France, those which brought Getúlio Vargas and Juan Perón to power in Brazil and Argentina between the 1930s and 1950s, the Arab world’s socialist populisms of the post-war era, the Canadian Social Credit movement of the 1960-1980 period, the farmers’ movements which arose off and on in Italy, France, the Netherlands, Germany and elsewhere, and many others besides. However, the oft-quoted Russian *narodniki* movement of the 19th century’s latter half has no place in that list: as Alain Besançon noted, it is an idealism that, because it failed to arouse the peasants it wished to emancipate, is better categorized as an intellectual than as a social and political movement.

Two justifications readily come to mind for that decision. If the issue bears upon the relations between populism and democracy, it is only prudent to reserve regions or ages in which the democratic reference is anachronistic, uncertain or still fairly new for special analytical treatments fully doing justice to their specifics³ – a task best left to other, more competent authors. *A contrario*, because populism has forcefully emerged recently where it was least expected: in the West, where democracy originated and is most firmly rooted, it is there that study and interpretation of that phenomenon especially recommend themselves.

Unlike its counterparts in most other regions, the contemporary populist wave on both sides of the North Atlantic has sprung up from below, either induced by new political forces and led by mavericks, or from the pressure applied on hitherto moderate parties by their support bases to radicalize themselves on one or several issues (notably, immigration and the social consequences of the post-2008 financial crisis). It raises several interrelated questions. The first relates to the causes or reasons for its simultaneous success in a large number of countries. The second concerns the peculiar populist style and the attraction it exerts today, which must be accounted for. The third examines whether it represents, as we often hear, a threat to democracy, especially at a time when representative systems are facing an all-too-obvious crisis. Underlying the other three, the last can be stated as follows: is it possible to go beyond an insistent parallel with the 1930s and a facile explanation in terms of irrationality and hatred as a response to the multiform malaise that has set in?

I.

From the literature that has accumulated since the 1960s some lessons can be drawn, which will be summarized below in fifteen points. It appears from the outset that populism is not an ideology *sui generis*: it is compatible in that regard with strongly contrasted options (i). Indeed, over and beyond widely shared detestations⁴ (free trade and globalization, big business, banks and the financialisation of the economy, multinational firms, the European Union, public and third-sector international organizations, the media, the arrogance or lack of proximity to

³ The (contemporary) regions alluded to include: (1) Central and Eastern Europe, where democratic experience (the former Czechoslovakia excepted) does not exceed the last three decades, and whose long history must also be taken into account: the Ottoman threat or occupation up to the end of the 17th century (which may explain its frontal opposition to multiculturalism, explicitly targeting Islam), and the still vivid resentment of the treaties that ended World War I, and deprived some countries, primarily Hungary, of vast territories (which may account for the resurgence of nationalism); (2) Latin America, repeatedly subjected to military regimes in the past, is experiencing (with a few exceptions: Argentina and Chile after the end of military dictatorships) rates of political violence and social inequality that are far removed from classic standards of democracy as a regime and society; (3) Asia: India in the last decades (an interesting case, given its strong democratic institutions) and to the extent that they are democracies, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand. (4) Africa, where it takes the form of identity nationalism seen as an extension of anticolonial struggles. Of note is that the diversity of cases is great even within single regions. In Latin America, those of Venezuela, Brazil and some Andean countries are *very* different. In Europe, the populist wave emerged from below in some places (on the left in the south, due to the 2008 financial crisis, on the right in the west and north, induced by the recent migration crisis), but from above elsewhere: in Eastern Europe, it was government parties that turned to populism.

⁴ There is a common core that cuts across the diverse varieties of populism, reflected in the votes of their MPs: in the Dutch Parliament, for instance, between 2004 and 2010, left-wing (SP) and right-wing (Geert Wilders' PVV) populist deputies voted the same way in 44% of cases. Cf. Simon Otjes & Tom Louwerse, "Populists in Parliament: Comparing Left-Wing and Right-Wing Populism in the Netherlands", *Political Studies*, vol.63, n°1, 2015, pp.60-79 : <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1467-9248.12089>.

citizens of elected officials and leaders above a certain level), one can easily detect a conservative or reactionary pole (marked by an opposition to multiculturalism in all its forms) and a progressive one (itself divided according to whether the struggle aims first at inequality or discrimination). However, a blurred or confusing picture emerges when the movements or parties involved combine in practice (or without warning alternate between) seemingly contradictory options with regard to this left/right divide.⁵

The only ideal, politically indeterminate, ingredients that populism exalts are (ii) the general will, easily translated, in a time of now unhappy globalization, into a reaffirmation of political, economic, social and cultural sovereignty, and in a rejection of the constraints that come with international multilateralism ; and (iii) a strong belief (reminiscent of Orwell's – in no way populist – *common decency*) in the virtues of the people, defined as a homogeneous entity, on the Left because it is “inclusive”, on the Right because it is (or should be) “monocultural”. There follows (iv) a Manichean opposition between the “people” and its “enemies”: all those who, holding the high ground, filter the expression of the general will and derail it to serve their collective interests or offbeat worldview. Such mistrust of elites and intermediate bodies (v) derives from an often vehement dissatisfaction with the *status quo* – from a revisionism (vi) directed, or so it seems, at the institutions themselves⁶ as much as at the deleterious way in which they are being operated by those entrenched within them, held responsible for the current misery because they have cut themselves off from “ordinary people” whose aspirations they no longer understand, or despise.⁷ Resulting therefrom is (vii) a nostalgia for a golden age when democratic citizens, in full possession of their rights and aware of their duties, were not treated as minors by a “framed democracy”.

Among other hard-to-deny surface features that many observers pinpoint are the facts that (viii) populist movements are more often than not embodied in charismatic leaders who give their expression a personal, often decisive, turn – although they surf waves created by the context much more than they initiate them in order to storm into power, or to exist politically;

⁵ Donald Trump has made such practice a habit : in the tradition of George C. Wallace, he combines “leftist” policies, tending to protect workers and farmers through protectionism, preserve certain benefits (social security, Medicare, etc.), and stimulate economic activity through spending on infrastructure, with hard-right orientations when it comes to immigration, liberalization of societal norms, and external multilateralism. The confusion created, even in supposedly informed circles, by this unusual mixture of policies or orientations is real: it may explain, for example, why movements or parties commonly catalogued as right- or extreme right-wing (Fidesz and Jobbik in Hungary, PiS in Poland, Golden Dawn in Greece) are classified as “left-wing populists” in a study as serious as that published in 2016 by Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris under the title “Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism” (Harvard Kennedy School Faculty Research Working Paper, RWP 16-026).

⁶ Populist discourses often include a dimension that is subversive of the existing order, but also a redemptive one, promising the establishment of a better democratic order : a more direct link between the people and government – notably by encouraging the consultation of the former on the main options open to it. This underlines the crisis of representative democracy experienced by most Western nations, and the populist disdain for the procedural forms of democratic processes.

⁷ This results in a “throw-the-rascals-out” posture (“*dégagisme*”), and an explicit desire to de-professionalize politics. In France, the “yellow vests” movement of 2018 was strongly reluctant to appoint spokespersons or representatives (despite the insistence of the media and government, in need of contacts for “dialogue” purposes). The populists’ mistrust of elites even applies to their own leaders when, whether or not associated with doctrinal fights, people’s quarrels come to light at the top, usually on the Left rather than on the Right. This is what we have seen successively, for instance, in the Scottish Socialist Party (2006), Spain’s PODEMOS (2016) or La France Insoumise (2018).

(ix) far from identifying with easily recognizable groups or social backgrounds, their audience presents a “catch-all” character that transcends traditional divides; and (x) their success does not necessarily seem linked to a major economic crisis (although it can serve them where it is), since they are seen to flourish in contexts (United States, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, and many other countries) where no despair of this type is observed today.⁸

Often alleged but more ambiguous are their anti-pluralistic inclinations (xi). Such are certainly reflected in the populist mistrust of countervailing powers – not least the media – which have supposedly turned into objective accomplices of the “system” and the “people above”, no longer adequately relay demands “from below”, and are seen as part and parcel of an “establishment” that is the source of almost all ills. But populism conceives of itself as a response to the absence of *true* pluralism – as an alternative to the indistinguishable policies implemented by rulers of both right and left as a result of strong external constraints, electoral strategies aimed at conquest of the political centre, and a single elite mindset that it no longer finds bearable. If populists aspire to a certain unanimity, it is because they know that is the price to pay to preserve unity within their motley ranks – a unity cemented by revisionism as long as fighting the “system” is the order of the day, but which would be jeopardized if positive options had to be defined. (This may also explain why they seem less successful when they inhabit the corridors of power than when they are agitating at its doors).

If, then, populism does not present itself straightforwardly as a positive and unequivocal ideology, as a movement with a clearly defined support base, or as a strategy of access to power, what is it? The best way to define it is probably to see it first and foremost, as does a large part of the literature, as a political *style* (xii). More precisely, as a rhetoric and posture whose general tone is easily recognizable: depending on location, it marks the emergence or the return of political dissensus, which it shapes through and through. Its trademark, verbal bluntness, borrows from both a right-wing polemic tradition⁹ and caustic working-class banter, and is easily distinguished by its rejection of decorum, propriety, or even politeness. To this must be added the liberties it takes with established truths – its notorious recourse to “alternative facts” –, its sometimes *ad hominem* verbal attacks, and the confidence with which it is apt to affirm or do today the opposite of the day before. The histrionics of its leaders seem to be inherent in it, as is the delectation its often “politically incorrect” language provides.

An interesting point is that populist leaders do not shelve this more or less markedly demagogic style once in high State office, but maintain it as a communication strategy – a

⁸ This limits the scope of the parallel often invoked with the 1930s, already weakened by a major difference: we do not live today in the shadow of revanchist militarism and a possible major war between big neighbours. Today’s stress on sovereignty is devoid of aggressive nationalism in international affairs, and the present forms of populism in the West can hardly be equated with the fascism of that fateful decade. See: Jean-Yves Camus, “Comment expliquer le retour fracassant des populismes?”, *Les Inrockuptibles*, 3 September 2018, available online at: <https://www.lesinrocks.com/2018/09/03/actualite/politique/comment-expliquer-le-retour-fracassant-des-populismes-111120796/>.

⁹ However, it should be noted that the language used remains far less abusive than in the 1930s on the Right. In particular, the virulent anti-Semitism of those years finds no parallel in the recent period. The only trace of resentment against Jews resides in cases of ambiguous undertones in political discourse in relation to the perceived failures of global financial capitalism. But that is not specifically tied to populism or to the Right (as witnessed by the intimations for which British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn recently drew fire).

means for them to safeguard the unity of their electoral support base despite the ambiguity, or the zigzags, of the policies they conduct – and to continue distinguishing themselves from the hated elites who preceded them in power (xiii). Another proven way is, through the transgression of forms, to cultivate the charisma that befits those who want to embody the popular will, and which induces in them, when in power, a “Platonic” manner of exercising it: as long as they are assured of the support (measured by polls) of their electorate, populist leaders can free themselves from legal forms or norms, even brave judicial risks, and leave scrupulous respect of legality to Statespersons of lesser status.

Last but not by any means least, the populist style is greatly favoured in terms of audience by media hungry for controversy,¹⁰ and even more so by the massive influence of the information and communication technologies (Facebook, Twitter, and the like) available today, which are the extremely reactive (“viral”) vectors of expression or mobilization of the masses’ spontaneity, transgressive affect and inclinations (xiv). The effectiveness of this style – its postures, slogans and simplisms, multiplied by the wide, instant diffusion that these social networks ensure – is such that it has become contagious and that it now affects, concerned as they are to speak the language of the people, leaders of mainstream parties. So that (xv) today’s populism is as much a matter of degree as of kind.¹¹

II.

“...one possible way of approaching populism would be to take at face value some of the pejorative labels which have been attached to it, and to show that those pejorative connotations can be maintained only if one accepts, as a starting point of the analysis, a set of rather questionable assumptions. The two pejorative propositions to which I referred were: (1) that populism is vague and indeterminate in the audience to which it addresses itself, in its discourse, and in its political postulates; (2) that populism is mere rhetoric. To this I opposed two different possibilities: (1) that vagueness and indeterminacy are not shortcomings of a discourse *about* social reality, but, in some circumstances, inscribed in social reality as such; (2) that rhetoric is not epiphenomenal *vis-à-vis* a self-contained conceptual structure, for no conceptual structure finds its internal cohesion without appealing to rhetorical devices. If this is so, the conclusion would be that populism is the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such”.

Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London, Verso, 2005, p.67.

One of the most penetrating analyses of populism is that of an Argentine post-Marxist thinker who made his career in an English university: Ernesto Laclau (1935-2014). Close in his youth to the progressive wing of Peronism, he became an internationally recognized intellectual figure of the radical Left inspired by the writings of Antonio Gramsci. He published

¹⁰ Populism generates echoes – to an extent that is more than proportional to the news it creates – in a print media in desperate search of compelling stories because it is faced with declining subscriptions and advertising revenues, and strong competition from news websites and social media. This is what Matthijs Rooduijn notes in *The Guardian* dated November 20, 2018 : while this “quality” British newspaper published some 300 articles containing the terms “populism” or “populist” in 1998, this figure rose to 1,000 in 2015, and doubled yet again in 2016. Cf. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/political-science/2018/nov/20/why-is-populism-suddenly-so-sexy-the-reasons-are-many>.

¹¹ Hence the use for empirical research purposes of populism scales that measure the degree of populism in party political expression, especially through electoral manifestos. While most such attempts rely on synthetic scores, others break populism down into distinct dimensions to bring out nuances that would otherwise be out of reach. Cf. Luke March, “Contrary to popular opinion, there is no populist upsurge in Britain”, 2017. See : <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2017/10/18/contrary-to-popular-opinion-there-is-no-populist-upsurge-in-britain/>.

a landmark book in 2005, *On Populist Reason*, soon abundantly commented on. His originality is twofold: he does not hold the populist label to be pejorative, and, against the appearance of a certain unreason (and out of refusal of a purely sociological reading¹²), he views populism as a *political logic*. All the traits for which populist movements are usually blamed – the vagueness and imprecision of their rhetoric, their outrage, and anti-intellectualism – are seen by him as a *performative act* endowed with rationality. Such movements recruit from among actors whose demands remain structurally unsatisfied within the established democratic framework. These demands may be heterogeneous (“logic of difference”), but if they succeed in coalescing around a common-denominator discourse (“logic of equivalence”), the carriers of such a discourse may claim to embody the “people” against the “system”, dominated by an “oligarchy” of “corrupt” elites out of touch with the population and unable to meet its expectations. If this discourse manages to impose itself as self-evident, it generates a separation of society into two political camps whose dividing line erases, or strongly relativizes, existing divisions within the institutional framework in place – in the manner, he says, of a third party who overthrows a chessboard and generates solidarity against the spoiler between the two players suddenly deprived of their game.

The “people” is a mythical abstraction, in the sense that no one has ever seen it (it is an “imagined community”, like the nation for the nationalists). Yet, it fulfils an indispensable regulatory function in any real democracy, necessarily governed in its name. It is therefore an empty, though symbolically central, place waiting to be conquered by means of a “hegemonic” discourse. Such a discourse is politically indeterminate – it can fall to the left as well as to the right – for reasons that are both contingent and structural: it is sensitive to the context, especially to the force and orientation of dominant affect,¹³ but it also reflects a fundamental ambivalence of its bearers, torn between their awareness of being forgotten by the “system” and their first impulse to find their place in it (p.11).

This ambivalence, but also the need to make the logic of equivalence prevail over that of differences in order to maintain the movement’s unity, explain why the signifiers around which the hegemonic discourse is constructed are equally “empty”¹⁴ or “floating”¹⁵ – they consist of general, rather vague notions: Freedom, Equality, Justice, Truth, Order, Purchasing Power, etc., of which (to avoid internal dissension) care is taken not to specify the practical translation to be preferred. If that is the case, the act of naming becomes central: its

¹² The author draws his central references from political philosophy, language (Saussure, Wittgenstein) and discourse theory, psychoanalysis (Freud, Lacan) and early social psychology (Le Bon, Tarde, McDougall). Sociology is absent, as is economics.

¹³ “Since any kind of institutional system is inevitably at least partially limiting and frustrating, there is something appealing about any figure who challenges it, whatever the reasons for and forms of the challenge. There is in any society a reservoir of raw anti-status-quo feelings which crystallize in some symbols *quite independently of the forms of their political articulation*, and it is their presence we intuitively perceive when we call a discourse or a mobilization ‘populistic’” (*On Populist Reason*, p.123).

¹⁴ An empty signifier is not a signifier that refers to nothing: like zero in the sequence of numbers, it denotes an absence.

¹⁵ The “empty signifiers” of a populist movement become “floating” (thus moving the boundary between the antagonistic camps) when the regime under attack in turn becomes “hegemonic”, that is, also adopts a populist style: for example, when defence of the “small man” against the established social order is made in the name of the “moral” or “silent” majority.

performative value matters more than (elastic, or time-bound) conceptual contents. “Naming” the chain of equivalent popular demands gives the populist leader a role that, if it is fulfilled, makes his or her name the symbol of the movement’s unity.¹⁶

Populism is thus a set of discursive resources used to occupy the empty space that is the inaccessible totality of the people, a political category and not a datum of the social structure (which he sees as increasingly fragmented and plural as societies become more complex). It is thus a “normal” – if not indeed the only real – mode of constituting the political as such, that is to say, the relations between the particular and the universal, as well as the symbolic matrix within which the society becomes instituted.

One feature in this impressive scholarly effort is bound to intrigue the reader: at no time does its author, a radical-left thinker, rebel against the possibility that populism, characterized as politically indeterminate, may turn to the advantage of its right-wing variety. The thing becomes clearer if one considers that his thought, true to the Gramscian tradition, gives precedence to action over any type of historicism (“forget Hegel”, p.148): historical horizons are open.¹⁷ His only normative anchoring is democracy (which unlike Claude Lefort he does not restrict to its liberal variety¹⁸). The idea, premised on the need for a leftist popular subjectivity and the production of a discourse that enlists the masses’ affect and passions,¹⁹ is to bring about a radical democratization and empowerment of “oppressed underdogs” of all stripes (rather than of “exploited” workers, on whom post-Marxist thinkers no longer pin their hopes). This is achieved by political action, for which he advises a visual navigation: shorter-term strategies and more autonomous tactics than was the case in the old leftist tradition. Laclau can therefore only approve Chantal Mouffe (p.168) when, situating her remarks in the framework of liberal democracy’s symbolic matrix, she proposes an *agonistic model of democracy*: the theory is underpinned by a *libido pugnae* that befits the radical Left.

The author sums up his remarks in a few propositions: no purely conceptual order can account for the unity of social agents; it is necessary to “articulate a variety of positions or demands through nominal means, because no *a priori* rationality pushes those demands to

¹⁶ Laclau points out that where the fascist leader imposes his will on his followers, populist chiefs lead through the exemplary way in which they symbolically express the fervour of the “people”. This is reminiscent, though he does not quote him, of Max Weber’s identification of effective expressiveness in the cause of a collective enthusiasm as one of the sources of charismatic authority.

¹⁷ In the intellectual landscape of post-Marxist radical thought (now rid of working-class revolutionary dreams and the “teleo-eschatology” of yesteryear), only the Gramscians have a conquering – “hegemonic” – project. Other currents, influenced by “French Theory” (Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard, Rancière, etc.), are content to rely on a daily agitation intended to disrupt the liberal-democratic consensus, and “demand the impossible” in order to ignite the imagination of the masses by suggesting that another world is conceivable. However, all highlight the contingency of action, the undecidability of its ultimate consequences and the need for opportunistic risk-taking – under pain of having to renounce action altogether.

¹⁸ He turns to Chantal Mouffe (with whom he co-wrote several books, and who was his wife) to draw support for the idea that the association of democracy and liberalism is historically contingent, so that other types of democracy are possible. It may not be indifferent to note here that classical liberalism was based on a restriction of democracy to those with a stake in the system – the already empowered.

¹⁹ This emphasis on the role of affect has become common in radical leftist thought today (it is found for example in the writings of Frédéric Lordon). The reference (which was probably derived from Gilles Deleuze) is, of course, Spinoza’s “De Affectibus” in Part III of his *Ethics*, where the philosopher argues that understanding the mechanisms of affect makes it possible to turn them to our advantage rather than suffer their undesirable effects.

coalesce around a centre”; and the primary role in cementing this articulation is played by affect. “The consequence is unavoidable: the construction of a ‘people’ is the *sine qua non* of democratic functioning. Without production of emptiness there is no ‘people’, no populism, but no democracy either” (p.169). “[F]or this to be possible, the hegemonic force has to present its own particularity as the incarnation of an empty universality that transcends it” and show that it “has a legitimate claim to occupy that place”. Such emptiness, a creative absence, “is not just a datum of constitutional law, it is a political construction” (p.170). The author had already added (p.70) that the totality is but the locus of the tension between differential and equivalential logics:

[It] is an object which is both impossible and necessary. Impossible, because the tension between equivalence and difference is ultimately insurmountable; necessary, because without some kind of closure, however precarious it might be, there would be no signification and no identity.

III.

Criticism, far beyond that prevailing among radical Left intellectual circles, welcomed *On Populist Reason* as an illuminating and important work. It focused on the detail of the argument without noting that some of the less explicit assumptions that underlie it can be challenged. The best way to grasp this is to start from the political indeterminacy of populism.

Movements of this type are likely to vary more or less strongly in their orientations according to the conception (*ethnos*, *demos*, or *plebs*) that they hold of the “people” to which they refer. The ethnic variety, the oldest but one that had long remained on the margins, is a nativism exposed in the eyes of its enemies to the “sad passion” that is the rejection of the Other in the name of native people’s right to remain masters at home ; it experienced a resurgence from the moment when (in nearly all Western countries from the 1980s onwards, through the cumulative volume of its successive waves) immigration started to produce social and political effects, notably the emergence of multiculturalism.

Opposed, conceptually at least, to this particularistic cult of roots is the citizen option, distinguished by a view of the people as the ensemble of those who, on the basis of a cherished heritage (history, geography, culture) and a universalist political design, claim a common destiny and are ready to consent to the disciplines that this implies. The bearers of this civic conception had for a long time remained fairly quiet and reluctant to abandon themselves to populism ; but, reacting to a course of events that is far too contrary to their values, they too now seem ready yield to its appeal.

The last variety, on the Left, has two facets : one (apparent notably in Greece, Spain, and partly in Italy and France after the global financial crisis of 2008) favours the socio-economically disadvantaged, reasons in class terms, and retains old Marxist accents ; the other’s emphasis is on those who consider themselves discriminated against, or in some way symbolically dominated. It tends to prevail in North America, where it does not always have a marked populist character – it depends upon the type and virulence of unfulfilled demands – since, for half a century, the powers-that-be (including the Judiciary, the media, and intellectuals) have not been hostile to it.

Laclau, if he does mention them as a possibility that cannot be dismissed, does not deal with ethnic and civic varieties of populism, which he bundles together. He may not be *absolutely* wrong on this point, as for lack of a broader reference (and because of the obsolete, or less relevant, character of more restricted, e.g., regionalist, references), the “people” in both cases is equated with the Nation – a two-sided concept whose universalist and particularistic, individualistic and holistic dimensions clearly come out in its classic definition as a “community of citizens”. Many authors have noted that if the ethnic and civic definitions of the nation oppose each other, they do so only as ideal-typical constructs, i.e. as pure logics. This has never prevented historical nations from simultaneously drawing on these two sources of inspiration – to different extents. It is also true that between ethnic and civic populisms, the frontier is sometimes porous and blurred, in people’s minds and in action, especially when populism of the third (left-wing) variety places them in the same (right-wing) bag and tries to marginalize them. This holds even if, by nature, civic populism is less hostile to the instituted liberal democratic order than its ethnic counterpart, and for this reason is less easily discernible than the latter (journalists seldom make the distinction).

It is important at this point to note, however, that the same nuance is observed in the populisms of the Left, between a “progressive” and a “citizen” wing. This is, for example, what within Spain’s PODEMOS opposes Pablo Iglesias’ “Marxist-like populism” and Iñigo Errejón’s “transversalist” one,²⁰ or within La France Insoumise, the currents known as “gauchiste indigéniste” and “républicain souverainiste”. And if, symmetrically there too, a degree of porosity can be observed with regard to the usual themes of the extreme Left, one is nevertheless struck by the presence on both sides of a centrist civic option – an observation which will constitute one of the bases of the hypothesis advanced below.

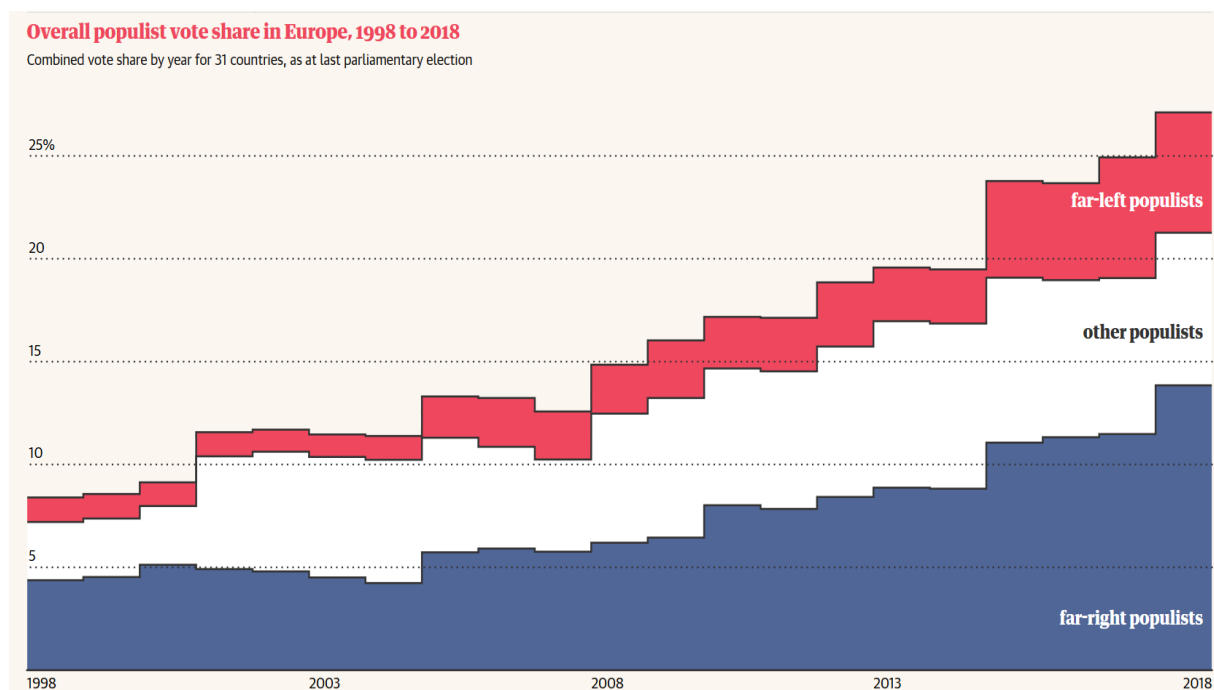
Laclau is thus wrong to underestimate the civic variety of populism and confuse it with the ethnic variety, but also to be insensitive to the nuances within the movements claiming the *plebs* as their central reference. Why? Because of the balance of forces prevailing among the three varieties, as documented by election results, opinion data, or national surveys²¹ and comparative research efforts on the situations observed on either side of the Atlantic.²²

²⁰ Iñigo Errejón’s recent interviews with French media place him squarely on the civic side, especially when he sets the target of his “transversalism” at the “centre of the chessboard” (just as Jean-Luc Mélenchon is endeavouring to attract support from the “*fâchés mais pas fachos*” and abstainers). Cf. *Regards* (<http://www.regards.fr/web/article/le-congres-de-podemos-plebiscite-pablo-iglesias>, 12 February 2017); *Le Vent Se Lève* (<https://lvsl.fr/people-nouveau-sujet-politique-de-notre-temps>, 6 May 2017, and <https://lvsl.fr/inigo-errejon-on-gagne-lorsqu-on-devient-le-candidat-de-la-dignite-et-de-la-souverainete>, 19 August 2018); *FigaroVox* (<http://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/politique/2018/03/30/31001-20180330ARTFIG00244-iigo-errejn-la-plus-grande-reforme-qui-soit-est-celle-de-l-ordre.php>, 31 March 2018). This civic option, if that is what it is, seems to distance him from Chantal Mouffe (with whom he nevertheless co-authored a book in 2017: *Construire le peuple : Pour une radicalisation de la démocratie*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf) and Ernesto Laclau, whom he continues to praise in passing. The contradiction is only in semblance: deliberate ambiguity suits the needs of the unifying – “hegemonic” – populist discourse that Mouffe and Laclau recommend.

²¹ For instance, the survey entitled *Fractures françaises* conducted by IPSOS on a yearly basis, or a one-off Canadian opinion poll: “Les Canadiens, le populisme et la xénophobie” (CROP, 2017).

²² Among others: (1) the study on Europe published in *The Guardian* on November 20, 2018 (available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2018/nov/20/revealed-one-in-four-europeans-vote-populist>), a vast endeavour which mobilized some thirty European and American academics specializing on the topic; (2) Inglehart & Norris, *op.cit.*; (3) the “Populism Tracker” proposed by the (leftist) *Progressive Post*: <https://progressivepost.eu/spotlights/populism/>; (4) Andre Tartar, “How the Populist Right is Redrawing the Map of Europe” (December 2017): <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2017-europe-populist-right/>.

What does indeed the present situation reveal? That Donald Trump, not Bernie Sanders, is in the White House, and if the populist vote has almost quadrupled in Europe (from 7 to 27%) over the 1998-2018 period, its right-wing sort has constantly dominated its opposite number to the tune of a 2:1 ratio. This is what the following figure suggests :



Source : “Revealed : one in four Europeans vote populist”, *The Guardian*, November 20, 2018.

It further reveals that between the two slips a third populist vote, outclassing the leftist variety over the period, in favour of parties that adopt the style of populism but are more nuanced and selective in their hatreds or fears (Euro-scepticism, immigration – as distinct from sheer Europhobia or xenophobia), a vote that can only come from moderate voters disenchanted by the practice of government parties.²³ In addition, based on the answers provided by international panels of experts on political parties and their electoral manifestos in 31 European countries, Inglehart and Norris (2016, *op.cit.*) feel justified in asserting that in populist orientations the rejection of liberal-libertarian themes (open borders, multiculturalism, minority rights, liberalized societal norms, etc.) predominates over, though it does not annihilate, the desire to combat social inequalities.²⁴

This resonates with what is known more generally of the current state of public opinions. In particular, that some right-wing populist themes score far beyond the sole electoral

²³ This is attested in the Netherlands and Scandinavian countries. Jean-Yves Camus (*op.cit.*) notes : “Parties were born, and others flourished, which did not come from the traditional far-right : in Holland with Pim Fortuyn, in Scandinavia, where Danish, Norwegian and Finnish populisms are in fact moderate right-wing parties that have become radical on the issue of immigration”.

²⁴ In support of this statement, Inglehart and Norris note (pp.4 and 27) that the thesis of economic insecurity as the main explanation for the rise of populism is contradicted by the fact that the unemployed and those who, at the bottom of the income spectrum, benefit most from social welfare benefits are underrepresented among populist supporters, who are more likely to be recruited from the lower middle-class, especially though not exclusively in rural or peri-urban areas.

support of populist parties on the Right,²⁵ and are significantly present in answers from even respondents who report voting for the Left.²⁶ The thematic evolution of political policy offerings – apprehended through European parties’ electoral platforms – reinforces this view: in non-linear but overall increasing fashion, non-economic themes have dominated since the 1980s over economic topics,²⁷ though the latter’s share remains substantial.

These findings may account for the fact that while left-wing populists, particularly those inclined towards the socio-economic emancipation of the masses, are present and often vocal, they no longer play the leading role in the current climate.²⁸ But two of the observations quoted above require interpretation: namely, the coexistence within each camp of subdivisions in tension, if not in conflict, with each other, and the preponderance in the recent period of the rightist element that rejects multiculturalism. On the first point, the authors cited conclude that the populist phenomenon is bi-dimensional and pits cultural against socio-economic issues as independent dimensions; on the second, they resort to a Tocquevillian-type interpretation: social systems evolve in the direction of a perfecting of their dominant logic until its disadvantages accumulate and induce a change of course.²⁹

The idea that political attitudes and voting behaviour are organized into two independent dimensions is not new: it appeared in Seymour Lipset’s writings as early as 1959, and was taken up by Ronald Inglehart in his inaugural work: *The Silent Revolution* (1977).³⁰ As of

²⁵ The Eurobarometer’s 2018 edition ranks immigration (38%) and terrorism (29%) as the first concerns of people in the EU, far ahead of the economic situation (18%) and unemployment (14%). In 2017, the Pew Research Center (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>) indicated that 44% of American adults regard Islam as intrinsically incompatible with democracy, while such negative perceptions are held in Western Europe by slightly under 30% in Germany, France and Britain, 35% in Sweden et the Netherlands, 50% in Spain, and over 60% in Greece and Italy. The same year, a Gallup poll showed that 46% of Americans deemed “not needed” any new legislation to protect the rights of LGBT people (<https://news.gallup.com/poll/210887/americans-split-new-lgbt-protections-restroom-policies.aspx?>); the 2015 Eurobarometer placed at almost 30% the proportion of Europeans who do not think that gays and lesbians should enjoy the same rights as heterosexuals. Even Canada, considered very liberal on all these topics, shows a public opinion where 62% think in terms of a need for Muslim immigrants to forsake their culture and adjust to Canadian mores, and 43% find exaggerated the attention afforded to LGBT people (CROP survey, 2017, *op.cit.*).

²⁶ The issue of possible populist attitudes among non-voters deserves sustained attention: abstention, defined as the percentage of citizens of voting age who have chosen not to vote in their country’s most recent elections (or even fail to register as voters), is a major phenomenon: orders of magnitude in Western Europe spread from 13% in Belgium to 61% in Switzerland, with an unweighted average of 31.2% ; the United States stands at 44%, Canada at 38% (source: Pew Research Center Fact Tank, 21 May 2018: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/21/u-s-voter-turnout-trails-most-developed-countries/>). One recent Dutch study notes that on populism scales the attitudes of non-voters are not very far from those of the voters who opt for left *and* right populist parties (Agnes Akkerman, Cas Mudde & Andrej Zaslove, “How Populist Are the People? Measuring Populist Attitudes in Voters”, *Comparative Political Studies*, vol.47, n°9, 2014, pp.1324-1353). Non-voters thus constitute a vast reserve army for populist parties, though there is no telling on which side they would fall: the literature provides scattered findings suggesting that it would benefit the Right more than the Left (if so, left-wing bids to win back non-voters are doomed to fail), but few systematic studies.

²⁷ Inglehart & Norris, *op.cit.*, figure 6, p.39.

²⁸ Observers of the French “yellow vests” movement have noted that, even though over 40% of its actors identify with the Left, anticapitalist slogans are entirely absent from their demonstrations.

²⁹ This may be a generous assessment: Inglehart seems to have long considered that the “silent counter-revolution”, i.e. the backlash against liberal-libertarian orientations, had no future and that social evolution would see “post-materialist” values continue their ascent. The upsurge of contemporary populism apparently forces him to revise this judgment.

³⁰ Seymour M. Lipset, “Democracy and Working-Class Authoritarianism”, *American Sociological Review*, vol.24, n°4, 1959, pp.482-502; Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Publics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1977.

today, the latter author sees the history of the last half-century as the rise (generated by economic well-being and higher education levels) of “post-materialist” values, starting from an initial situation (the post-war Fordist era) where the socio-economic axis clearly prevailed, until the now dominant liberal-libertarian “new political culture” induced a “cultural backlash”, and the focus on norms and lifestyles now overrides – but does not eliminate – socio-economic concerns.³¹

In other words, the social question is no longer as central as it may have been at the apex of the nation-state, a time when Alain Touraine’s formula – “cultural consensus, political compromise, social conflict” – applied. The expressive individualization of social relations, coinciding in time and effects with strong immigration flows (as of then no longer subject to the old imperative of assimilation), has considerably changed the equation: it has substituted for the previous cultural homogeneity a marquetry of identities fighting for their recognition. The multiple cultural conflicts that derive from this configuration (of which some idea is given by the *culture wars* and *identity politics* that have raged in the United States since the 1980s) now structure society in depth. It follows that, even if its relevance has not entirely disappeared, the old right-left dividing line is counterbalanced and beyond that by a second cleavage separating those who accept and those who reject multiculturalism. The existence of two orthogonal splits is blurring the lines, inducing as yet fuzzy political realignments and, insofar as the concern for cultural security seems to override class logics for increasing fractions of the working classes, hampers a progression of the radical Left inherited from the 19th and 20th centuries.³² What is true of Western political societies in general seems even truer with regard to populist movements.

Laclau can be excused for ignoring these elements: his book was written at a time when they had not yet fully manifested their effects. It remains that his myopia (like Chantal Mouffe’s) is voluntary: it derives from a postulate. The populism he calls for can only refer to the people as *plebs*, for any broader definition of the *populus* would be tantamount to making it a fully reconciled society – a scene on which there would be no populism, hence no democracy, and no politics either; such a society would be oppressive (p. 94). In other words, the reasoning is based on an equation – *democracy = radical conflict*³³ – thus denying the possibility of a pluralist political society having at any time the “choice” between (at least relative) harmony and dissensus (whether radical or not) around the definition of a common good.

In view of the above observations and analyses, it is possible to reverse Laclau’s postulate and risk some conjectures: the main inspiration of contemporary populism is the

³¹ Two Dutch scholars illustrate this by showing that there are now in the Netherlands two Lefts and two Rights, old (Labour vs. Conservatives) and new (Greens vs. right-wing populists). Voting follows either the “old” socio-economic axis (indexed to class positions) or the “new” cultural axis (indexed to school attainment levels), with a majority voting for the Right among those with less, and for the Left among those with more cultural capital – irrespective of class. Cf. Dick Houtman & Peter Achterberg, “Two Lefts and Two Rights: Class Voting and Cultural Voting in the Netherlands, 2002”, *Sociologie*, vol.1, 2010, pp.61-76.

³² This is what some quarters in the European radical Left seem to have become aware of very recently, judging by the emergence in Germany, within Die Linke, of the Aufstehen! movement which stands out on the topic of immigration, and a seemingly nascent change of posture on this subject within the British Labour Party and La France Insoumise.

³³ Chantal Mouffe’s explicit reference to Carl Schmitt is a telling one in this regard.

reference to the *demos*; the centre of gravity of the nebula that characterizes it lies in, or between, the “civic” nuances that have been detected in the populist movements of Right and Left,³⁴ which raises the issue of whether they will eventually come together, at least by converging “objectively”; political indeterminacy is not about whether it will lead, with no other alternative, to a “hegemony” of either the *plebs* or the *ethnos*, but on whether “civic populism” will succeed in convincing ruling elites to give up options that lead the “people” where it obviously does not want to go; finally, the dominant sentiment expressed by the civic variety is much less hatred or resentment, the “sad passions” so often alleged, but exasperation with the deafness or contempt of the powerful vis-à-vis “deplorable people” or those “who smoke fags and drive diesel cars”.³⁵

This raises two questions, one relating to the status of these conjectures and the developments that follow, the other to the use that can be made of Ernesto Laclau in a perspective other than his own. On the first point, it is clear that, based on scattered indices assembled in the manner of a reconstituted drawing by joining points between them, these conjectures are no more than that: their claim to validity deserves to be tested in a more systematic way than is possible here.³⁶ On the second, from Laclau’s work one can certainly keep the idea that populism is a set of discursive resources aimed at condensing heterogeneous unfulfilled demands in order to produce a hegemonic opinion to oppose elites and media pundits in the name of the “people”. On the other hand, this writer will refrain from making it the alpha and omega of politics, and will be less reluctant to resort to sociology in order to clarify the social and historical anchoring of populist movements.

IV.

“In this accumulation of perils, some are hoping for a convergence of struggles. These hopes too must be cooled down: I would stress rather a “synchronization of frustrations”, more conducive to the expression of acute exasperations than to the structuration of an organized collective will”.

Louis Chauvel, “Les espoirs envolés des classes moyennes”, *Le Monde*, December 9-10, 2018.

Everything has been said in the last decade or so, correctly on the whole, about the social facets of the malaise that affects Western societies, especially the lower-middle classes³⁷ that have long been their stabilizing centre – and are overrepresented in populist movements as among their sympathizers. One can thus be pardoned for dealing with this aspect only briefly.

³⁴ For a similar intuition: Luke March, “Left and Right Populism Compared: The British Case”, *British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, vol.19, n°2, 2017, pp.282-303. This author distinguishes between populism and what he calls *demotism*, which only shares with it a common style and rhetoric. The article is available online at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1369148117701753>.

³⁵ These remarks were made respectively by Hillary Clinton during the 2016 US presidential campaign, and by Benjamin Griveaux, spokesperson for the French Cabinet, in October 2018.

³⁶ The empirical base on which this article rests consists of the opinion data and the secondary analysis of surveys already cited, supplemented only by fifteen unstructured telephone interviews conducted (especially for the purposes of sections V and VI below) between October and December 2018. The interviewees were nationals of five countries (France, Belgium, Switzerland, Italy, United Kingdom) recruited on condition of anonymity through personal connections, on the criterion of favourable opinions with regard to populism in general.

³⁷ Branko Milanovic and Christopher Lakner’s *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization*, (Harvard University Press, 2016) has shown that the Western middle classes have been globalization’s only losers.

Globalization and the triumph of neo-liberalism over the last three decades have widened social inequalities – unevenly across countries. In the United States, they are now as large as a century ago, to the point that Emmanuel Todd has felt justified in writing that today’s American society is an oligarchy rather than a democracy. France distinguishes itself by still moderate and generally stable income inequalities,³⁸ with the notable exception of the richest .01% (leaders of large business corporations, key figures in the star system, etc.) whose gains have soared to stratospheric heights.³⁹ Inequalities lie between these two extremes in the rest of the European continent, not without causing trauma in places steeped in strongly egalitarian traditions like the Nordic countries. The mechanism is familiar: the sharing of the economic surplus has benefited shareholders more than wage-earners, whose incomes have stagnated relatively (sometimes, as in the United States, for decades on end), thus increasing the importance of inherited or accumulated wealth – which happens to be much more unequal than incomes. When wages or salaries prove insufficient to maintain standards of living or save, being able to draw on assets built up over several generations makes a difference.⁴⁰

Countries, such as France, which have not been able to adapt their tax systems to these realities, impose additional difficulties on their lower-middle classes. Too “rich” to benefit fully from social welfare, too “poor” to take advantage of tax optimization schemes used by the upper classes (and large globalized companies), they bear a disproportionate share of the total tax burden. They discover with dismay that threshold effects provide those nominally below them in terms of skills or merit with standards of living comparable to theirs, while with much reduced tax-rate progressivity, the incomes of the richest individuals and companies do not give rise to the contributions that might be expected to national budgets and welfare safety nets. The economic crisis of 2008, unbalanced public finances (where they had not previously been put right), the orthodox budget policies dictated by EU guidelines on deficit limitation, and the resulting limited room for manoeuvre have only compounded matters.

At the same time, a more or less continuous rise in real estate prices in cities, and in Europe the difficulties associated with intercultural relations in large suburban complexes initially designed to house them, have pushed back the lower-middle classes to places of residence further away from urban centres, thus increasing commuting distances (and forcing many households to own two cars): the extreme sensitivity that has emerged in France about fuel prices and new environment-friendly technical standards threatening to force people to barter suddenly devalued old vehicles for more recent model cars should come as no surprise. Their exodus coincided in time, under the influence of budget constraints and a neo-liberal

³⁸ François Bourguignon, “Vous avez dit inégalités... mais lesquelles, au juste ?”, *Le Monde*, 12-13 November 2018.

³⁹ The effect of new reports on the incomes of big business leaders (as when one hears that the CEO of a large automobile consortium earns 45,000 euros a day, i.e. more than 1,000 times as much as workers at the bottom of wage scales) is demoralizing – in all senses of the word – for everyone, including those whose incomes are 4 or 5 times higher than the minimum wage. When in addition news filters through that the holders of these stratospheric revenues do not shy away from tax fraud over and beyond the legal tax loopholes which they enjoy, popular consent to taxation starts eroding.

⁴⁰ The future looks even bleaker: purchasing power has hitherto been prevented from sagging by massive imports of (often Chinese) manufactured goods at cheap prices made possible by lower labour costs than in the West. Such a situation cannot be expected to hold indefinitely, especially if the end of “happy globalization” unleashes a wave of protectionism and trade wars.

philosophy now applying to them, with a shrinking of public services in sparsely populated areas, depriving many rural villages or peri-urban zones of their post office, primary school, local tax centre and police station, and pushing away access to administrative centres, courts or maternity wards by not inconsiderable distances. These areas were eventually condemned to see local businesses leave in search of better prospects and to turn into “medical deserts”, making it even more imperative for locals to use their cars. After three decades, these processes ended up superimposing a territorial divide on the social fracture. France offers a caricature of such sequences, but there are very similar examples in other countries.

Another dimension of the social malaise relates to unequal school careers, the “breakdown of the social lift” (caused by too many devalued diplomas chasing too few enviable job opportunities, or ill-adapted to the labour market), in some countries high levels of youth unemployment, and the perception that for the first time since the immediate postwar period the socio-economic prospects of a generation will be lower than its predecessors’. To this must be added concern over the future of retirement pensions. For good measure, interpretations of populism sometimes add a “digital divide” that overlaps with a generation gap, an opposition between globalized elites and “folks from somewhere” (or winners and losers of globalization), and even an ethno-racial dimension staging “poor Whites” ulcerated by immigration and the attention granted to “visible” minorities.

Even if there is reason to suspect hasty generalizations behind these last assertions,⁴¹ the fact remains that the fear of a drop in status and a growing sense of exclusion are part of a general landscape to which populism, by its excesses, attracts attention. It would be a mistake, however, to stop there. Those who do so tend to dwell on a critical interpretation that emphasizes resentment and supposedly uniform hatred on the part of populists. Yet, this social aspect does not by any means exhaust the issue of populism.

How can one tell that this is so? For one thing, populist themes are echoed well beyond the lower-middle classes or the perimeter of rural or peri-urban habitat. The heterogeneous, fairly blurred or even incoherent demands mouthed by populists hardly sound like narrow interest-group or class-based claims. And if a spontaneous movement has been known here and there to be motivated by populist social anger, such a feeling, as becomes apparent in the next phase, is only its “detonator”: it soon opens on more general themes. The disputed decisions that triggered the movement are seen as the last straw – as one sign too many of the “neglect” or “contempt” they suffer at the hands of the “system” and its elites. If this is the case, no simple social remediation can really heal the various exasperations (and leftist hopes that the movement can be taken advantage of to coalesce sectoral fights into something more impressive politically are mere wishful thinking).

A particular difficulty encountered by analysis resides in the porosity of populism with extreme right- and left-wing views, and in the conceptual fuzziness which marks the expression of its heterogeneous demands. However, when trying to eliminate possible ideological

⁴¹ Alone, poor rural Whites in the United States would not by far have been enough to have Donald Trump elected. As for the digital divide, observers of the roundabouts held by “yellow vests” in France have been struck by the dexterity with which they use Facebook and WhatsApp to interact with each other and coordinate: the only “fracture” seems in reality to reside in the inequality that still affects network coverage and broadband access between cities and countryside areas.

contamination in order to extract from its gangue the deeper inspiration that drives what has been called the centre of gravity of populism, the themes that come out most strongly are the “denial of democracy” and of “dignity” suffered by the “people”, its “need to be recognized and understood”, concern for the general interest and a revival of the “citizen spirit”, an end to the “secession of elites” as well as to the primacy of economic over political considerations,⁴² and, perhaps most importantly, the requirement for new democratic procedures designed to do away with the filters and biases that representation introduces between expressions of the general will and the policies conducted by those at the helm.

There is perhaps no better example in this respect, although it presents some strong peculiarities, than the recent French “yellow vests” movement. It is a spontaneous, completely decentralized, populist movement without leaders – and which obviously does not want any: a mark of distrust towards *any* representation ; whose initial grievances were directed at excessive taxation, but very soon widened to strong demands for institutional reform ; whose rather typical social make-up⁴³ has not so far prevented public opinion, despite the disturbances caused by its actions, from massively supporting it⁴⁴ ; which has taken advantage of the violence perpetrated by extremist groups of right and left who outflanked its demonstrations in the big cities to make itself heard from and send a strong signal to the Government ; which stubbornly refuses to be annexed or co-opted by any right- or left-wing union or party (there was no dearth of candidates...) ; and astonishes onlookers by the flags – which for a change are neither red nor black, nor bearing the insignia of far-right factions, but tricolours – brandished by its members (to which must be added the *Marseillaise*, sung on more than one occasion, as well as symbols borrowed from 1789 and 1830 imagery – Marianne, Phrygian caps, Delacroix’s Liberty Guiding the People).⁴⁵

⁴² This point is reflected in the refusal of English Brexiters (subjected as we know to the influence of populist arguments during the 2016 referendum campaign) to be intimidated by the Bank of England’s recent gloomy economic forecasts in case of a ‘no deal’ exit : “Brexit goes well beyond the issues of gross domestic product (GDP). Reducing immigration, restoring sovereignty, ‘regaining control’, seem much more important than the problems of corporate leaders. A recent poll by YouGov reiterates the point : 42% of Britons believe that growth will fall because of Brexit, against 24% who believe it will increase. But no matter : 61% of those who voted ‘Leave’ say they are ready to suffer ‘serious economic damage’ to reach their ideal”. Cf. Éric Albert, “Brexit : l’argument économique ne convainc plus”, *Le Monde Éco & Entreprise*, December 11, 2018.

⁴³ Median-income white-collar employees, self-employed people and retirees account for 70% of its membership, while the working class and middle and senior management are underrepresented : cf. “‘Gilets jaunes’ : une enquête pionnière sur ‘la révolte des revenus modestes’” (a report on a pioneer field survey conducted by a collective of 70 academics), *Le Monde*, December 12, 2018. Another survey of supporters active on “yellow vests” Facebook groups finds that 56% of them are women (a rare characteristic in social movements), 80% live in rural areas and small towns, and fully 74% are economically insecure (almost twice the proportion for the country as a whole): cf. “Les valeurs politiques des ‘gilets jaunes’”, *Le Monde*, 27-28 January 2019. Interestingly, those who think there is too much immigration do not exceed the national proportion (60%). Since observers have noted the absence of anti-immigration slogans in “yellow vests” demonstrations, the indications are that ethno-racial resentment is *not* the movement’s primary motivation.

⁴⁴ A Viavoice opinion poll published by *Libération* on November 30, 2018 showed that the “yellow vests” were supported by 53% of respondents, plus 31% “who understand the movement” (only 10% were against). Another Odoxa survey for *Le Figaro* and *France-Info* published on December 6 placed such support at 77%.

⁴⁵ Apart from demands for (Swiss-style) referendums organized at the people’s initiative and the possibility to recall elected officials, ostensible use of these symbols of the Nation by people about whom the collective inquiry published by *Le Monde* on December 12, 2018 reveals that 42% place themselves on the Left (as against 19% in the Centre and on the Right, and 38% on neither side or do not answer) shows that we are very far from a Spinozian “multitude” (as proposed by Paolo Virno in his *Grammar of the Multitude*, 2004) denying the “people” any unity or status as a political subject. What we face here is indeed a demand for a reaffirmation of citizenship.

V.

“There are majoritarian ages, where everything seems to depend on the will of the greatest number, and minority eras, where the obstinacy of some individuals, of some restricted groups, seems sufficient to create the event, and to decide on the course of things. (...) [I]f I was asked to define the present time, I would say that one of its particular characters is the transition from a majority period to a minority period”.

Serge Moscovici, *Psychologie des minorités actives*, 1979.

“If populists were asked who the people are, I think that they would produce a definite answer. They would say that the people is the majority of their society, natural men who have been robbed of their proper post in life ; then try to point to groups of artificial, corrupt men as holding down large groups of natural men. If the victims are not the large majority, populism falls”.

Isaiah Berlin, verbatim of exchanges during the aforementioned 1967 London School of Economics conference on populism.

What are the motivations of the supposedly central “civic” variety of populism? The distrust of any representative system and insistence on the general will are of course reminiscent of Rousseau (which may explain why these traits seem more marked in France than elsewhere). We know that in his eyes the transmutation of majority feeling into the general will to which all citizens are supposed to bend through the law is the keystone of democracy. So strong before the introduction in 1958 of the constitutional review principle (and its affirmation in practice after 1971), the French “legicentric” tradition finds its roots there. But, obviously, it now arouses nostalgia, and echoes abroad.

We also know that the majority principle’s justification, as Georg Simmel reminded us, is somewhat tenuous.⁴⁶ Moreover, this principle has been undermined for some time by two circumstances: electoral results are often tight, and the magnitude of abstentions as well as blank or void votes is such that the winner (or the victorious option in a referendum) only garners a minority of registered voters. It is not therefore on electoral majorities that the “centrist” populist demand for a revitalization of citizenship can be based, but on the supposedly central majority core of those who accept the duty of citizens: to pass their own (material, but also expressive) interests after the general interest, a condition on which the pursuit of the common good is premised. However, for half a century, social evolution has been in the direction of individual emancipation at the expense of citizen allegiances, threatening the production of the common good, and turning political majorities into coalitions of minorities on which rest the electoral strategies of government parties.

These minorities are no longer just the mark of political and socio-economic disagreements: driven by the growing need for expressiveness, they are cultural and thirst for recognition of their identities. They are defined by ways of life or moral causes rather than by

⁴⁶ “That an opinion expresses exactly the sense of the supra-individual unity of the whole for the sole reason that those who carry it are in greater numbers than those of another opinion is indeed an indemonstrable dogma, and even so weakly founded *a priori* that if we do not resort to a more or less mystical relation between this unit and the majority, it does not really stand up, or rests on a rather pitiful principle: after all, something needs to be done, and if it really is not permissible to assume that the majority as such knows what to do, then *a fortiori*, there is no reason to think that the minority is in a position to know any better”. Georg Simmel, “Die Überstimmung. Eine soziologische Studie”, *Vossische Zeitung*, n°91, 23 February 1907.

material interests, and they have multiplied: feminists,⁴⁷ gays and lesbians, ethno-racial groups differentiated according to their origin, transgender people, vegans, zealots of the animal cause – the list is hardly exhausted. Over the last half-century, they have made themselves heard, on the initiative of often virulent activists or moral entrepreneurs, by noisy transgressions of dominant norms in order to have their status as victims of discrimination or the moral legitimacy of their cause fully recognized, to lend credence to the “normality” of their practices, impose their vocabulary and language prohibitions, and finally to have them set, under pressure, in legislative stone.

The mainstream of Western societies long left them unchallenged, convinced that emancipation and its attendant hedonism, resulting in a new primacy of the individual, were a good thing, and that in the atmosphere thus created certain social norms and old stigmas were outdated. However, it began to stiffen when such change ceased to be entirely painless: when, for ever larger segments of societies, it became a source of multiple constraints in everyday life, both public and private. It balked when insistent “politically correct” norms made their appearance, suggesting that outside of the liberal-libertarian path that was being traced for it, there could be no salvation. It stiffened even more when the media turned into self-appointed guardians of this *doxa* (now seen as a banner of moral virtue)⁴⁸ and joined the activists in denouncing all reservations as the mark of mentally retarded hatemongers, subject to various “phobias” that the new laws now allowed to prosecute.

This has led to situations where groups representing 4% or even 0.5% of the adult population can force the remaining 96 or 99.5% to adjust to new standards, to monitor their language at all times (or face the risk of inadvertently offending someone), revise their grammar and spelling, and even redefine their identities according to categories imposed by one or more minorities.⁴⁹ Thus, for example, some countries (Germany, Canada, India, plus a number of states in America) have now added a third genre to the traditional division between men and women, for the benefit of those who identify with neither of these binary categories, making it necessary in the process to review the whole edifice of civil law. Still this may only be the beginning⁵⁰: the vogue among activists of the concept of “intersectionality” (the

⁴⁷ Feminist activism was among the first (from the 1970s onwards) to follow that road successfully, and served as a model. But its minority status is ambiguous: if feminist activists are a minority, the population they fight for is not – in most societies women outnumber men by a few percentage points. This is the case of no other minority.

⁴⁸ This is the case in the US, where public confidence in the media has gone through a long-term decline: from 72% in 1976 to 50-55% between 1997 and 2005, before falling to just over 40% on average over the next ten years; it stood at 32% in 2016 (cf. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1663/media-use-evaluation.aspx>). This two-step loss of trust coincided with the emergence of “culture wars” (1985-1995), then with that of “political correctness”. Interestingly, over the 1997-2017 period, supporters of the Democratic Party were more satisfied with the media (in proportions of around 60% on average) than declared Independents and Republicans (whose trust went down respectively from 50 to 35% and 45 to 25% between the first and second half of that period), which signals a perception by more than half the adult population of a leftist bias in the media treatment of the news. Such synthetic statistics unfortunately appear to be unavailable for Western Europe.

⁴⁹ One of the interview respondents noted that those who have never even thought of becoming transgender are surprised to learn that they belong to the “cisgender” category.

⁵⁰ Beyond this new three-part division, the literature on gender suggests that when combining (present, indistinct or absent) genital attributes with sexual orientations and practices, the total number of possible genders reaches several tens (35 or 63, depending on authors). Societies are thus invited to a mental revolution demanding that they forgo familiar social landscapes.

accumulation by certain groups of minority attributes seen as stigmatized or a source of victimization) suggests that the emergence of micro-minorities, each with its agenda of constraints to impose on the rest of society, is in the offing.

Moreover, as new immigrant arrivals tend not to assimilate, and second- or third-generation Muslim nationals (for whom religion is a marker of their rejection of a society that discriminates against them) often return to their cultural roots, difficult though essential questions are raised about possible cases of conflicting fundamental norms (civil law vs. sharia), security (due to a halo effect which in perceptions makes these groups a potential breeding ground for home-grown Islamist terrorism), liberties (forced marriages, attitudes towards women, homosexuals, apostates, etc.), and identity (which up till then majorities scarcely claimed, but now seek a groping definition of in order to counter its dilution). Despite the promise of immigration as a source of labour in countries where unemployment is unheard of (Germany, Scandinavia, Switzerland, the US and others), a non-negligible part of the population sees it as either a burden, a threat, or the introduction of an alien culture, and it has given rise to the emergence of parties that specifically target it – with a fair degree of electoral success. Other segments, seemingly more numerous, accept it as an irreversible fact, but nonetheless demand of immigrants tangible signs of integration and, in the face of a sudden increase in migratory pressure, a stricter control of future inflows. Annoyance is palpable when activists of (self-mandated) associations or NGOs dress the issue in ethical garb (in terms of a duty of compassion, humanity, hospitality, etc., as if the sermon on the mountain could serve as a foundation for policy), and denounce as morally despicable those who question their options. And when the citizen turns to the past to ask how we got there, he or she does not recall ever having been consulted on an issue that, like this one, was apt to alter the face of society: one is referred back to the denial of democracy populists make so much of.⁵¹

A fearful mechanism is set in train when political elites, renouncing citizen universalism, come to believe that the promotion of differences and “diversity” is the only way to manage the consequences of their predecessors’ imprudence, and when the entertainment industry decides to give them a hand. This is what happens, for example, when the French viewer finds that in almost all TV crime series, the investigation is conducted by a woman – against all probability : women make up only a quarter of the workforce of ranking investigative branch police officers – or that, if male, the person in a position of authority very often comes from “diversity” backgrounds unless he is old, ridiculous, or pathetic. The average man on the other side of the TV screen eventually comes to understand that the director of the series sees him as a being steeped in prejudice that society needs to fight (which he will deem unpleasant if precisely he had never thought of denying anyone a rewarding merit-based career in the police). Perceiving that he is being assimilated to the undifferentiated mass of “dominant white males” suspected of sexism or racism, he may see good reason to question the insistence of an implicit message that describes him as a figure of the past. He may in turn – especially if he feels dominated rather than dominant – denounce ideological collusion among elites of all kinds who never miss an opportunity to deliver that message and take on the best role at his

⁵¹ In France, the decision to ease family reunion for immigrant workers, a move that powerfully transformed French demographics in a generation and a half, was made in 1976 by executive order, and passed largely unnoticed at the time.

expense. In the worst case, he will mentally identify with the target group, and will be tempted by paranoia: a perfect case of self-fulfilling prophecy.

What these illustrations suggest is that for a very large part of the population, the subjective cost of a society that grants all the claims of cultural minority groups may be much higher than meets the eye. The long-held frustration that results from such a predicament goes far to explain the populist style's appeal, and the popularity of leaders when they crudely give vent to it verbally – it brings many people psychological relief.

This frustrated subjective dimension is probably one of the most powerful driving forces of populism. It derives much of its strength from the imbalance that now affects the relations between majority and minorities. Such an imbalance invites us to reconsider some classical conceptions: if, on the basis of what he had seen in Andrew Jackson's (populist) America, Tocqueville had been able to point to *majoritarian tyranny* as one of the dangers lurking for democracy (John Stuart Mill later joined him in this belief), many are now reversing the proposal and denounce a tyranny of minorities.

However, exasperated subjectivities hardly exhaust the issue. Indeed, the present configuration of relationships between large and small numbers is not without raising yet other fundamental sociopolitical questions, as shown by the example of the United States (where it has prevailed for a longer period than in Europe, and where some trends are more firmly delineated). Cultural minorities that have become expressive and clamour for the free manifestation of their differences in public spaces (instead of reserving them, as in the past, for their private spheres) are subject to the temptation to isolate themselves by cultivating their identities apart from the rest of society. Their demands of the outside are such that they make intercourse with them a rough experience, and they end up limiting any interaction and dialogue to their members (a possibility afforded them by social networks). When on the defensive, they are tempted to protect themselves from “micro-aggressions” in “safe places” from which any presence other than that of their members is banned.⁵² Going on the offensive, they attack any cultural, including artistic, language or portrayal at variance with their specific values,⁵³ or any content borrowed from types of expression they consider strictly their own. In doing so, they turn their identities into essentialist sanctuaries while at the same time criticizing the mainstream for tentatively defining what characterizes it. Worse, they institute a regime of self-censorship, and censorship *tout court* for writers or artists now vulnerable to the wrath of the judicial system.⁵⁴

The image of society looming on the horizon if this logic's momentum were given free rein is that of populations divided into silos, where only those who feel they belong to the same minority are in contact with one another, and protect themselves from whatever looks alien to it. This raises the question of the possibility of generating enough common ground between

⁵² Safe places were initially an initiative to protect vulnerable groups (e.g., disabled or autistic people). This practice was soon adopted by groups that are not: race or feminist groups have recently taken to organizing meetings closed to Whites or men. This practice, now common in some circles in the United States, is beginning to creep into Europe.

⁵³ Even classics are not immune to these practices. In Florence in January 2018, Bizet's *Carmen* was “corrected” on grounds of “femicide”: in the version proposed by the director, it was Carmen who kills Don Jose.

⁵⁴ Cf. Emmanuel Pierrat, *Nouvelles morales, nouvelles censures*, Paris, Gallimard, 2018.

social groups to form viable societies, or even of peaceful coexistence among them. This vision is sufficiently problematic for even authors who place discriminated groups at the centre of the plebeian “people” they wish to see emerge, like Laclau or Benjamin Arditì, to worry about the perspective it opens up : a system of voluntary apartheid as the culmination of an integral differentialism whose aporia they emphasize.⁵⁵

Forty years ago, Serge Moscovici saw the coming of an “age of minorities”. Four decades later, populist impulses sound like a call to democratic order : if majorities cannot do as they please all of the time, they have at least the right not to allow Gulliver to be bound to the ground by Lilliputians. Forgotten, their opinions ignored,⁵⁶ grassroots citizens are ranked (as Jacques Rancière would say, though in a very different sense) among those *who do not count*. They now invite their elites to come down to earth, and reverse course.

VI.

[Let us] “(...) not give in to demagogy by referring the matter solely to citizens’ capacity for discernment (...)”

Françoise Nyssen, French culture minister, while introducing to Parliament a new bill intended to fight the dissemination of fake news in May 2018.

The various exasperations mentioned above draw on yet other sources. The few interviews conducted for the purposes of this article (*cf.* footnote 36) offer a panorama of what is at stake here – however opaque and intuitive the comments collected on these topics may appear.

The least obscure of these sources is nostalgia for an age when the logic at work in the public domain was not limited to that of markets and bookkeeping exercises. It is not a question here of the purely social consequences, already discussed, of the neo-liberal order, but of the devaluation of citizenship it has effected by making the consumer and the logics of personal interest the alpha and omega of contemporary societies. This nostalgia is less clearly apparent in North America than in Europe, and nowhere as strongly felt as in France. It translates into a desire to see consumerism counterbalanced by an official nod to the notion of public good(s). This desire largely accounts for the growing Euroscepticism that has emerged as the consequences of the European Union’s philosophical conversion to neo-liberalism began to be concretely felt. Interestingly, such distrust is directed not at the European ideal itself, but at the existing institutions and their ideological orientations.

Much less clear in their verbal expression are the reproaches addressed to contemporary statecraft as regards relations between ruling elites and the citizen. The best way to pinpoint what they amount to may be to start from the example provided by roadside speed cameras. Little known is that these devices have grown increasingly controversial in a number of

⁵⁵ Ernesto Laclau, *La guerre des identités: grammaire de l’émancipation*, Paris, La Découverte, 2000 ; Benjamin Arditì, *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism: Difference, Populism, Revolution, Agitation*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

⁵⁶ This applies in particular to European policy matters : public opinions in France and the Netherlands have not forgotten that their governments and the EU ignored their “no” votes in their respective 2005 referendums on the proposed European constitution, nor do Irish voters forget that they were strongly invited to reconsider and vote again in 2002 after their initial rejection of the Nice Treaty.

countries as government and police authorities are accused of deceptive tactics that aim to raise extra revenue rather than improve road safety. In rebellious France (where the Treasury is planning on fully one billion euros from this source alone for 2019), cases of destruction or neutralization of these cameras had been on the rise for some time despite the very heavy fines imposed on perpetrators when identified. We now hear that after two months of “yellow vests” demonstrations and roadblocks, no less than 60% of such contraptions are out of order all over the country – without any explicit meaning being spelled out for such actions. What can it be? While cameras have reduced the volume of road deaths and injuries, fed the national budget and freed the police from tedious tasks, the subjective downsides are real. *Bona fide* drivers who make a point of behaving responsibly are apt to complain that speed limits are too often arbitrary and excessively variable; that camera surveillance creates an unpleasant atmosphere⁵⁷; and, as a percentage of household budgets, cumulative fines for trifling offences are apt to reach hefty yearly amounts (soon felt to be unbearable for low-income families). Most importantly, whereas the flesh-and-blood policeman of old could discriminate between reckless and responsible driving on the basis of circumstance and the offender’s apparent profile, road cameras are unforgiving and do not distinguish between complete novices and seasoned drivers, or worse, between those who are a real danger to others when behind a wheel and those who take pride in not having caused a single car accident in their lives.

This goes to illustrate what seems to have gone wrong with public authorities. Bombarded with alarming abstract figures and the urgent advice of well-meaning experts in “accidentology”, as well as with understandable emotional demands from road victim associations, governments are called upon to act. They could reinforce repression of dangerous or troublesome driving, as they did before: but that course of action is thankless and expensive. Rather than hunt down the small number of really problematic road offenders, they prefer to rely on technology to compel the many. In doing so, they take the risk of alienating the citizen who pictures himself as responsible and capable of discernment. The latter, after being fined for the umpteenth time for no apparent serious reason, is likely to turn into an angry cynic ready for all transgressions where and when he or she knows surveillance means are absent.⁵⁸ While the “accidentologist” and the associations demanding more stringent new standards are playing their expected role as part of the new safety culture, the public authorities who give in to that pressure for comfort and revenue-raising interests do not assume the responsibilities of theirs – namely, envisage possible deleterious long-term consequences, resist some of these demands if they must lead to making the State an essentially punitive entity, and avoid

⁵⁷ While the police identify burglars and violent robbers in only about 15% of reported cases, drivers stand little chance of escaping the latest generation of roadside cameras, capable of detecting not only the slightest speeding, but also unfastened safety belts as well as mobile telephone use while driving, and of monitoring 126 cars simultaneously. Hence a growing sense among them of being literally hounded by public authorities – whereas nearly 6 in 7 serious offenders get away with their crimes.

⁵⁸ The same mechanism is found in other areas. A French female respondent living in a city centre where waste separation and recycling are practised recounts how she had been loyally playing the game until the day when a container’s lid could not be opened, and (like her neighbours) she deposited her properly closed non-recyclable trash bag at the foot of the container. The bag was opened by the municipal waste disposal service, and an envelope in her name found inside: a 68 euro fine was inflicted on her. Since then, she says, she has stopped sorting her refuse.

subverting that most invaluable asset for it: citizen loyalty.⁵⁹ There is hardly any need to look elsewhere to account for the salience, in the “yellow vests” rallying cries, of their demand to abolish the new blanket 50 mph speed limit on secondary roads.

The same process is at work when, in the name of a presumed higher good, the State introduces new norms widely regarded as infringing on personal freedoms in public health or child-rearing matters. While it is amply justified to make certain safe vaccinations compulsory in order to counter serious risks of epidemics, it is much less so when, following recommendations from well-meaning professors of medicine or child psychology, it sets out to combat the ravages of smoking, alcoholism or child abuse by stacking taxes and surcharges on the sale of tobacco⁶⁰ and liquor, or by enjoining parents from even verbally reprimanding their children. By doing so, rather than combat abuse, addiction or proven ill-treatment, it prefers to coerce *all* consumers and families and make them feel guilty. In such cases, the same official disapproval or stigma attaches to sensible and excessive consumption or treatment: government presumes to be in a better position than private citizens to appraise contexts, and ends up *a priori* suspecting everyone of *vice* or brutality.

These logics have flourished in government practice for decades, to the point that not content to constrain and tax citizens to reform behaviours that until then had never been regarded as deviant, public authorities have now taken to manipulating them with a disarming good conscience. Social engineering reigns supreme, as no end of experts stand ready to feed the system with new ideas. The practice of “nudging”, introduced by the British government in 2010, then by Barack Obama in 2015, gives some idea of what it amounts to. The aim is to “improve” behaviours by harnessing behavioural psychology and economics in order to influence, inhibit or speed up private citizens’ decision-making processes, at the appropriate moment, by a gentle “nudge” that resorts to various technical ploys, some harmless, but others downright annoying.⁶¹

In all these cases, the State chooses to ignore the citizen’s capacity for discernment and dispenses with his or her assent. Predicated on a morality presented as self-evident and consensual, its paternalism translates into ever-narrower limits on people’s everyday life freedoms. With precious few exceptions, Western ruling elites have allowed this philosophy to

⁵⁹ Examples are in no short supply of good official intentions that result in unanticipated consequences. In a large foreign city that weighs household waste to adjust the refuse collection tax to everyone and thus limit its weight, residents have had to lock up their dustbins in order to prevent cheating on the part of unscrupulous neighbours. It is easy to realize that in such circumstances trust in others, a powerful adjunct to the citizen spirit, is bound to suffer.

⁶⁰ One respondent points out that the height of absurdity is reached when public authorities seem to contradict themselves by weighing the option of legalizing recreational cannabis at the same time as they combat tobacco use.

⁶¹ Oliver Wright, “Barack Obama to bring Whitehall’s ‘nudge’ theory to the White House”, *The Independent*, September 16, 2015. Experts providing social engineering hints for governments are inclined to keep upping the ante when it comes to manipulation. That is what a recent op-ed piece published in *Le Monde Éco & Entreprise* strongly suggests: “More arguments, more incentives, more statistics are not enough to convince citizens and consumers (...). The identification of these errors derives from studies showing that many of our decisions and behaviours are determined not by rational and thoughtful calculation, but by emotional and impulsive processes. Taking into account this emotional reality, and systematically making sure that the measures implemented avoid falling into these errors, can increase the effectiveness of public policies or private initiatives without incurring high costs” (K. Farrow, G. Grolleau & N. Mzoughi, “Comprendre les émotions pour changer les comportements”, December 22, 2018).

become dominant, and their well-meaning policies have eventually resulted in a failure of mutual trust: treated as if they were unwitting *bad* citizens, the governed no longer place much confidence in their rulers.

The reactions of the body politic to such trends are only uneasily verbalized. But one gets a sense that the new insistence on good intentions and lofty sentiments is suspect – that it actually conceals an ideological big stick handled by oddly unanimous ruling or expressive elites inclined to concessions made to militants of all stripes. The “people” is treated as a dangerous, potentially uncontrollable, pachyderm animated by “rancid” feelings “that do not do mankind honour”. It responds with cynicism, an uncomfortable attitude that is difficult to sustain for those responsive to civic ideals. Hence the suffocating sensation often mentioned in the interviews – one that is without remedy, except revolt and demands for a popular right of veto on the policies conducted by the powers-that-be. If this is true – the hypothesis remains to be validated –, therein resides another dimension and source of contemporary populist movements in the West.

VII.

How to assess these movements’ historical significance? How, in light of the “civic” hypothesis advanced (and the factors enumerated) above, can one account for their emergence and simultaneous success throughout the West? At the risk of offering but a very schematic interpretation, answers to these questions can be formulated as follows.

At the beginning of the process is the accelerated individualization of social relations. The thing is relatively new: even if the Individual was from the beginning on the scores that Modernity plays, it only made its full effects felt during the last half-century. The mechanics of individualization are driven by various engines that were clearly seen *in statu nascendi* by classical sociologists.⁶² All relate to long-term social equalization processes and to technological development (not least the specialization and complex organizational relationships that it induces); to the rise of the monetary economy and of much higher living standards; to the emergence of social rights and the security they afford with regard to the hazards of life; finally, to higher levels of education; all tend to diversify experiences, to free individuals from dependence on small local (including family) groups and from submission to their norms – in short, they relax social ties, and strengthen personal liberty, free choice and critical mind.

It was not until the consequences (notably on the younger generations from the 1960s onwards) of unprecedented economic development levels⁶³ impacted societies that these engines

⁶² **Tocqueville** (progress of equality, hence of competition and relative deprivation, at the expense of solidarity), **Tarde** (logic of dispersion induced by the development of means of communication, which by exempting individuals from physical co-presence erodes their sense of community and transforms them into members of impersonal “publics”), **Durkheim** (deepening division of labour), **Simmel** (money as a universal medium that liberates people from dependence on proximate others; the individual at the crossroads of multiple social circles, free to choose among their norms those to which he or she will submit), **T.H. Marshall** (progress of social rights, which substitute the welfare state for the family or local solidarities of old); **Lipset** (effects of rising standards of living and education levels on the independence and critical thinking of individuals).

⁶³ Michel Forsé’s application of the principles of thermodynamics to social processes (in *L’ordre improbable*, Paris, P.U.F., 1987) taught us that in a closed society with a stable workforce, any increase in available resources results in a spontaneous tendency to equalize socio-economic statuses and lifestyles (and that this tends to loosen social bonds). It should be noted that, conversely, the opening of the system’s borders generates a resurgence of inequalities within it, which illuminates the effect of globalization almost everywhere since the 1990s.

started to run at full throttle. This evolution was eased along by the older generations' memories from the two world wars, and by ideological fatigue in the final stages of the Cold War. Hedonism ensued, which predominantly took the form of narcissistic expressiveness: the free manifestation of one's tastes and life choices – of one's individual "authenticity". In now affluent societies, goods and services are consumed less for the need they satisfy or their practical utility value, than as signs of differentiation or distinction: the rise of "post-materialism" can also partly be explained in this way. To a certain extent, except for a few still stigmatized groups, social identity is now chosen rather than assigned: reference groups define it as much as membership groups, if not more.⁶⁴

To sum up, the last half-century has seen a radical emancipation of the individual, one likely to deliver serious blows to citizen's allegiances. One of the most profound meanings of the movements that broke out in 1968 in France and the United States (with less spectacular but no less real reverberations elsewhere) lay in the rejection by the then younger generation of the notion of citizen duties.

This has carried an important consequence for democratic political systems: as emancipated individuals (and the minorities they identify with) feel weak and vulnerable to institutions, organizations and society in general, they tend to fear power in whatever form, and to resist it as much as they can. They challenge it collectively, or rely on the pressure applied by the most militant to erect walls of legal protection around them, guaranteeing new, eagerly sought-after rights. From the 1970s on, the term "domination" has assumed increasingly negative connotations – even when domination is in theory legitimate. Intellectuals, in the broadest sense including teachers and journalists, have turned into critics of the dominant order, and thinkers who have gained fame are those who do not shy away from negativism.

In such conditions, power and authority become difficult to exercise. Government leaders' position is weakened: after shorter and shorter political honeymoons upon assumption of office, their confidence or popularity ratings regularly fall, most often to vertiginous depths. Their capacity to deliver on their promises and for transforming society is now much lower than it used to be, and after a few decades the discredit they suffer has now extended to the representative system as a whole. If corporate managers (to whom neo-liberalism has given a freer hand) seem better off, it is essentially because of a lower media visibility – but inside companies disputes are rife (and routinely take the form of factory occupations, or even, in France, forcible confinement of executives). Cultural power hardly fares any better, to the point that, for instance, works of contemporary art that are deemed offensive by outsiders have been known to be deliberately deteriorated. Journalists are no longer welcome in many places or circles, and major electronic media anchor people, treated as "public speech oligarchs", arouse

⁶⁴ M. Forsé (*op.cit.*, p.140) explains that with "an increase in entropy due to growth (swelling of the middle class, averaging out of lifestyles, etc.), the system had to provide new distinctive criteria, and thus new sources of identification. As a result, today occupational status seems to be no more than a means of social classification among others. As it mitigates the homogenization trend, the diversification of sources of identity leads to a more complex identity mechanism and gives agents leeway that they did not enjoy before. Having to act on different planes to compose their image, they can now opt for strategic behaviour". He adds that associations [N.B. whose number in France rocketed from 20,000 in 1970 to 70,000 in 1990 before fluctuating around this last figure since then] was one of the most commonly used vehicles for implementing these strategies.

barely less distrust than politicians. Experts, especially on sensitive topics, are suspected *a priori* of bias, complaisance, or conflicts of interest; so are social scientists when their findings are transparently tainted with ideological concerns or manipulation; even “hard” science does not entirely escape such strictures, when reports of false data used in previously acclaimed studies surface in the press, or large public opinion segments worry about possible applications of new discoveries. As for intellectual influence, it seems to have literally vaporized outside of academia. After decades of simplistic ethics of conviction resulting in disasters (as in Libya in 2011), subversion of concepts as well as methods, and promotion of cognitive and cultural relativism (whose legacy is the post-modern mantra— *all* reality is socially constructed, and the given is “fascist”), it is disarmed today when faced with the “monstrosity” of “alternative facts”. No word seems able to carry weight any more: our age is experiencing a twilight of authority (of which contemporary comedians’ derisive tone and mockery of just about everything is emblematic). All of this paved the way for populist rhetoric and style, which would not have been otherwise possible.

In the face of all-round contestation, the wielders of authority and power in a democracy do not directly impose their options any more (except in technical matters, which for this reason they tend to favour as sources of solutions): they seek advice from experts in the media eye, consult or negotiate with the most vocal activists, delegate to independent non-partisan authorities or committees of ranking academics, and grant concessions, soon turning into new standards, to the agenda of militant associations or cultural minorities, in the name of humane feelings or pacification of controversies in the public domain. To cover themselves, they use law and worthy sentiments as fig leaves they end up abusing. This is what, as early as 1968, a Dutch author (writing about his country, pioneering in its early advent as well as in recent protests against it) named the *politics of accommodation*.⁶⁵

Moreover, be it as humane and well-meaning as it may, the concern to promote an “inclusive” society (one that leaves no one by the wayside) is the source of a headlong race to the margins: one that is self-defeating and lost in advance because those who live on the fringes of society more often than not do so for the heck of it, so that systematically trying to integrate them only invites the creation of new marginal lifestyles. And it has an insidious downside: as it is simpler and far less troublesome for those in political office to impose on loyal, law-abiding grass-roots citizens submissively engaged in living their lives, and who until then had relied on their governors to represent and protect them – the large number of *natural men* that Isaiah Berlin, paraphrasing Diderot, contrasted with the small numbers of *artificial men* –, the temptation is great to coerce, suspect, manipulate, and punish them if they pretend to resist, all the while adorning this posture with the prestige of morality – that of people who “do honour to mankind”. But the grass-roots have now come to suspect that such a posture only poorly hides their elites’ intellectual and moral superiority complex, their lack of legitimacy, and their panic fear at the thought of having to repress true deviants.

In addition, what with globalization, laborious European compromises, and neo-liberal injunctions, far from being the locus where a societal project is defined and implemented,

⁶⁵ Arend Lijphart, *The Politics of Accommodation: Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1968.

politics has for three decades boiled down to mere management of constraints, resources, crises, and demands from active minorities. Perhaps to conceal it, those in office have taken refuge in incantatory exaltation of the rule of law, and of new rights giving rise to solemn international declarations. This is what, as early as 1997, philosopher Paul Thibaud had insightfully identified as a *deactivation of democracy*.⁶⁶ The reaction of the body politic to this state of affairs was at first apathy, in the form of growing abstention, or volatile voting in successive elections; next, those citizens suffering from socio-economic or cultural insecurity started relying on protest votes for extreme or even demonized parties or leaders in order to make themselves heard (a development that outraged the supporters of the dominant *doxa*, yet did not open any remediation prospect as the likes of J.-M. Le Pen were then unlikely to access power). The latest stage in this unfolding drama is the populist upsurge of the last few years.

Viewed through this prism, the emergence of populism signals the end of a master-trend which started in the 1960s. The logic of individualization that underlies it is reaching its outer limits. It is now confronted with a new phenomenon: the militancy of majorities who no longer recognize themselves in its ultimate consequences, know they cannot be dispensed with or by-passed if they won't allow it, and are clearly determined to make it known. It is a proxy militancy relying on movements or leaders who have opted out of the existing political consensus, whom they support and for whom they reserve the right to vote if their main, long unmet demand – put an end to the gap between ruling elites, their state of mind and their practices, and the general will of a body politic whose sense of alienation from the system has been steadily growing over time – were to remain stubbornly ignored. The fifteen characteristics which served to describe contemporary Western populism straightforwardly derive therefrom.

The demands placed on the political system are heterogeneous and vague, and the agents of populism, like their sympathizers, are most often hard-pressed to state the deeper meaning, to date still latent and hardly audible, of their action or support. Yet it should be noted that this is precisely what makes possible the “logic of equivalence” and the “empty signifiers” that populist movements require if they are to exist at all – and that analysts and commentators hardly do any better. As a philosopher lucidly pointed out in a recent op-ed piece, “populism is a phenomenon of historic proportions, but it seems as though we do not have the proper intellectual categories to think it through”.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ “As has become clear since 1989, the problem of contemporary democracies is (...) [that] they have increased and institutionalized the distance between the people and those in office. (...) They have empowered any amount of new intermediate bodies interposing between the will of the people and the management of public affairs. The shift from the sovereignty of the law to that of the constitution, and then to declarations of rights, has increased the power of exegetes, but diminished that of representatives to the point of making suffrage a lazy king. The rule of law (especially when the law is internationalized) is closed to citizens, suspected of liberticidal leanings. European regulations, justified by the necessity of practical compromise, do not refer to any general will nor even to any general interest, and illustrate how the body politic has been set aside. The state of disrepair affecting the Welfare State is the material side of a breach of the citizenship contract, of which the exhaustion of political representation is another facet. (...) The rulers who have taken politics out of the political for short-term gains (have others dictate terms that they themselves dared not propose) are now impotent in the face of a reluctant and withdrawn society”. The author adds: “those who ring alarm bells believing this is 1933 all over again do not seem to understand the difference between a rejection of democracy and the effects of its deactivation” (Paul Thibaud, in *Vingtième Siècle*, n°56, October-December 1997, pp.236-238).

⁶⁷ Florent Guénard, “L’élection ne peut pas être le seul gage démocratique”, *Le Monde*, July 7, 2018.

Because they are more concrete and more urgent, social demands are mentioned first by populist agents and external commentators alike. This article has argued that this is only the visible tip of the phenomenon, often its occasional cause, and that what we are talking about is a restoration of the citizen spirit and of political practices that no longer ignore the opinions of the “people”. Observation indeed suggests that of the three possible orientations of populism, the one that best describes its spirit – the “centrist” reference to the *demos* – is also (except in the case of France’s “yellow vests”) the most discreet in its expression. This is no doubt why, eclipsed by the more showy and decibel-charged expression of supporters of the “people” as *plebs* or as *ethnos*, it tends to escape superficial attention.

If such is the case, no purely social remediation will completely extinguish the fire; the “convergence of struggles” hoped for by radical leftists will not happen any time soon, at least not on account of the populists; and the stiff solutions advanced by right-wing populism, more influential than its counterpart on the Left, will probably be mitigated by the balance of forces and the nuances within each camp described earlier. If things are to improve, the institutional reforms to which the “populists of the centre” aspire need to be instituted without too much delay.

VIII.

Is the populism described above a threat to democracy? The only reasoned answer that can be given to such a question is: it depends – here as elsewhere, the future is open. It is highly possible that the central core identified – insisting as it often does on its non-partisan (“apolitical”, or of both “right and left”) character, and on its refusal to be taken over by anyone – may allow extremists to outflank it, an outcome that cannot be excluded due to its porosity and political indeterminacy. There would then be cause for worry – even if populism rises against the system *in the name of* democracy, not *against* it, and has so far shown no alarming illiberal inclinations in the West.

It is also possible, however, that the populists now in power, or at the source of potentially reckless options (e.g., Brexit), may discredit themselves due to calamitous results of their policies (plummeting purchasing power, mass exodus of nationals, etc.), in which case their example would be unlikely to spread, and anxiety would be laid to rest. But that is not the way things seem to be going in the West: as staggering as they are, Donald Trump’s seemingly erratic moves have so far failed to generate any disaster, nor any attack on democratic institutions or freedoms; the same seems true in Italy of Matteo Salvini *et alii*, and there is no indication that Brexit will not take place despite its practical drawbacks. The suspense will probably hold for some time yet.

To compound matters, even the most favourable reform scenario is not entirely problem-free. The constitutional issues to be settled indeed promise to be difficult ones. It will be necessary for the new institutional order to avoid incoherence, paralysis and deadlock – all of which Dahrendorf long ago identified as serious risks whenever citizens take a more direct part in statecraft.⁶⁸ There will be an overriding need to ensure that the active intervention of

⁶⁸ Ralf Dahrendorf, “Citizenship and Beyond: The Dynamics of an Idea”, *Social Research*, vol.41, n°4, 1974, pp.673-701.

majorities of until then politically passive citizens does not impinge on pluralism and the liberties of minorities or activists,⁶⁹ even though they will now be deprived of the power to impose systematically on the majority by taking advantage of weak political leaderships. The ruling elites themselves will also have to change their mindsets and practices: they should stop suspecting the “people” *a priori*, refrain from regarding it as a modern Gulliver that can readily be entangled, manipulated, lectured or indoctrinated, and even think of setting an example through collective behaviour that reflects something other than the desire to maintain their privileges through optimization of their economic, social and symbolic capital.

The task will be all the more arduous as, even if the engines of individualization come to a halt (it seems difficult to go much further in this direction), they will not run in reverse: the need for distinctive identities and expressiveness on the part of individuals, their fear of power and mistrust of others, the dominant consumerist logic, as well as the notion that the real must yield to desire, will not easily vanish from the scene – barring major crises or wars – and readily be replaced by a return to citizen allegiances and concern for the general interest.

In a context where representative democracy gives obvious signs of not aging well, the populists, with all their faults and outrages, nevertheless point to a requirement for such a return. The institutional devices put in place over two centuries, in eras when the masses were still uneducated, are in decided need of repair now that the governed enjoy much higher levels of education on average, and accordingly wish to make themselves heard in between election times. For this reason, remediation requires a redefinition of relations between elites and the “people” on the one hand, the majority and cultural or activist minorities, on the other. It involves a popular right of veto or, more positively, a degree of citizen input into the formulation of policy. Absent such remedies, the problem identified would become structural, have every chance of growing more acute, and come back to haunt democracies, perhaps in a more virulent form – the writing is on the wall.

Conversely, if by chance the required institutional reform comes about soon, the contemporary episode will not have been in vain. It will have served to remind us that the “people” is not just a “multitude” or a set of “populations” sharing the same territory: it is also a political subject, which gives meaning to democracy; that the tension inherent in the human condition – each of us is both a “private citizen” and a member of the community (*zoon politikon*), a specimen (as Simmel, *op.cit.*, again averred) of the “duality between the individual’s own life and that of the social totality” – is insurmountable, and “tragic in principle”; lastly, that the individual-is-king philosophy, the main source of the general malaise that has taken hold, was destined to reveal its natural limits sooner or later. Apparently, as the surge of populism bluntly informs us, these limits have now been reached.

⁶⁹ The Tocquevillian view that associations and a vibrant civil society serve to enhance democracy has been dominant since the 1970s. Under its aegis, the political weakness of those in power has resulted in a premium given to the more militant associations, more often than not out of step with the mainstream. A better balance must be struck between freedoms and consensus, conservatism and change.

In summary, unless the diagnosis offered above is in complete error, as they grapple with populism Western political systems are confronted with a choice: take into account, in the hope of a regenerated democracy, the underlying meaning its civic variety seems to be carrying, or continue sliding down the slippery slope of disenchantment and malaise, with perhaps a leap in the dark at the end of the road. Let us keep our fingers crossed.

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