

Populism and Populists

by [Paul Austin Murphy](#) (May 2019)



Le Masque Arraché, James Ensor, 1915

Everyone should be a little suspicious of the platonic Forms which go by the names *the People* and *the Elite*. This phenomenon of the reification of political or sociological entities is well captured by the French philosopher [Jean Baudrillard](#). (In this case, he talked about the Platonic Form *the Workers*.) He [wrote](#):

[The Marxist/socialist] says: 'the mass of the workers.' But the mass is never that of the workers, nor any other social subject or object... The mass is without attribute, predicate, quality, reference. This is its definition. It has no sociological 'reality'. It has nothing to do with any real population, body or specific social aggregate.

We should also be aware of the fact the terms “populism” and “populist” have been massively rebooted since the election of Donald Trump and the rise of UKIP here in the UK. These buzzwords have been used against just about every group and individual on the Right outside the Conservative Party too – and sometimes against the Tory Party itself.

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So leftwing activists and politicians have taken to these two words like ducks to water. Forget the words “neoliberal”, “Zionist” and “far Right”—they’re so passé. What we now have now are such words as “populist Right”.

I referred to leftwing activists and politicians a moment ago. Such people usually claim that *populism* is a “far Right phenomenon”. Indeed (leftwing) commentators have cast the net out far more widely than that.

For example, the former Mayor of London and former Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, has been described as a [“right-wing populist”](#) by *Prospect* and others. Jacob Rees-Mogg has also been described with [exactly the same words](#) by the *Economist*. Then again, these Conservative politicians have also been *linked* to the “far Right” by many of the very same (leftwing) commentators (e.g., by Hope Not Hate, the *Guardian*, etc.). In addition, *The New York Times* classed Ukip as [“the largest](#)

[right-wing populist party](#) in the United Kingdom.

Having said all that, in terms specifically of the academic use of the words “populism” and “populist”, they are neither new terms nor newly relevant.

For example, way back in 1967 a Conference on Populism was held at the London School of Economics. After that, an academic field known as [“populism studies”](#) emerged. In addition, interest in populism led to 160 publications on populism being published between 1950 and 1960. And between 1990 and 2000 there were 1500 further publications on this subject. This means that as much as thirty years before Donald Trump was elected and Ukip was vying for power, the terms “populism” and “populist” were in use in academia. Again, they were usually seen as negative phenomena. And all that’s despite the recent rebooting of the terms in specifically political (rather than academic) contexts.

Definitions

What’s been said above gives us a feel for how wide—and therefore how often vacuous—these kinds of term (i.e., “populist” and “far Right”) can be. So it’s no surprise that at least some academics have advised their fellow professionals to stop using the terms “populism” and “populist” altogether. Yes, these very wide-ranging and often vague terms have led some scholars to argue that they [“should be abandoned by academics”](#). More specifically, the “political theorist” [Margaret Canova wrote](#):

[I]f the notion of populism did not exist, no social scientist would deliberately invent it; the term is far too ambiguous for that.

So the words “populism” and “populist” aren’t really technical terms from political science or sociology. Having said that, this hasn’t stopped academics on the Left from frequently using the terms (in a negative context) in papers and “studies”. It is, then, a *political* term. That is, a tool of *activism through words*, rather than a term *about* politics. Not only that: it’s often a term which expressly puts an anti-populist position. So it’s no surprise that hardly any political groups or politicians have ever described themselves as “populists”.

Nonetheless, there’s one definition of the word “populism” that can’t be seen as being purely pejorative. That is the definition which simply defines *populism* as “popular engagement of the population in political decision making”. In addition, governments (rather than oppositions) can themselves be populist when they engage in such things as large-scale public spending, tax reductions, increasing the minimum wage, selling scare-stories about the NHS, etc.

In fact in one [book](#), populism is said to give a political voice [to those who feel](#)

neglected, even held in contempt, by increasingly distant and technocratic political and economic elites.

Not only that: it isn't the case that populism is always "authoritarian" either. It often simply reflects the felt need (among large sections of the population) for increased levels of democracy and accountability.

Take Brexit and the EU. Despite the many scaremongering futurist claims about the economy after Brexit, it's really the lack of democracy and accountability that are largely at the heart of this debate.

Leftwing Populism

If (on one definition) populism is simply a position which emphasises "the people" (and often juxtaposes this group against "the elite"), then this is just as much a phenomenon of the Left as it is of the Right. Indeed this has been the case since the French Revolution. And even before the French Revolution, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's notion of the ["general will"](#), for example, can be deemed to be view about the virtues of political populism. In addition, any leftwingers who focus on "far-Right populism" should also bear in mind Jeremy Corbyn's hero: [Hugo Chávez](#). The Venezuelan leader argued that an "economic elite" had sabotaged his reforms—and many Corbynites agreed with him. Indeed the idea of the General Will was itself updated by Hugo Chavez. So let Chavez [speak for himself on this](#):

All individuals are subject to error and seduction, but not the people, which possesses to an eminent degree of consciousness of its own good and the measure of its independence. Because of that its judgement is pure, its

will is strong, and none can corrupt or even threaten it.

Take also the example of the political theorist [Ernesto Laclau](#), who sees populism as being an “[emancipatory](#)” phenomenon which enables “marginalised groups” to challenge “elite powers”.

Furthermore, in the 20th century the term “populism” was often applied to leftwing and “anti-authoritarian” political parties and groups which were active in Western democracies and in Eastern Europe. And in the 21st century, the term was also used to refer to leftwing groups in the Latin American “[pink tide](#)”. It must also be added that [Syriza](#) in Greece and [Podemos](#) in Spain [were deemed to be populist](#).

To take another tack on this.

It's often said that populist parties are led by “charismatic figures” who present themselves as the “voice of the people”. Yet isn't this is an almost perfect description of Jeremy Corbyn? So although (admittedly) Corbyn is hardly “charismatic” (in my view at least), he has nonetheless inspired many people to a “cult-like loyalty”. In addition, isn't the Corbynite soundbite [“For the many, not the few”](#) meant to express the “voice of the people”?

The word “populism” has also been used as a synonym of “demagoguery”. In other words, the words “populist” and “demagogue” describe those politicians who present simplistic answers to complex political and economic questions—and who do

so in a rhetorical and emotional manner. Doesn't this, again, almost perfectly capture the phenomenon that is Jeremy Corbyn?

To sum up: if populism is indeed a real or substantive political reality, then it belongs just as much to the Left as it does to the Right—let alone *only* to the “far Right”!

So let's focus some more on Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party.

Corbyn's Anti-Populism Populism

The Labour Party's [Keir Starmer](#) was explicit when he used the buzzword “populism”. Basically, Starmer believes that “populists” work against socialist “internationalism”. Or in Starmer's [own words](#):

Let's hope 2019 is a year where long-established values of internationalism, cooperation and collaboration overcome populism across Europe and the World.

One point worth making is that Starmer is a [strong supporter](#) of the European Union. And, clearly, he sees the EU as a bastion of “internationalism”. His leader, Jeremy Corbyn, on the other hand, explicitly and frequently described the EU as a “[bankers' club](#)”—at least he did so until he became the Leader of the Labour Party in 2015! Of course Corbyn has now toned things down a little, lest he split the Labour Party in two.

So is Starmer saying that the EU isn't popular? I thought that Remainers said that it is. And isn't the Remain campaign itself a populist campaign? This shows, again, how mindless the word "populism" is.

Following on from that, it's extremely ironic that the self-described "radical socialist" Jeremy Corbyn has a problem with populism and populists . . . except for the fact that he actually only has a problem with (to use his own words) "the populist right", not with the *populist Left*.

More detail.

Jeremy Corbyn once urged (in a speech at the Party of European Socialists in Prague) "progressive parties" across Europe to unite against the rise of the "populist right". Mr Corbyn was referring to Donald Trump, the Freedom Party in Austria and, of course, UKIP. The Labour Party leader also accused right-wing parties of being "political parasites" who are "feeding on people's concerns". [He went on to say:](#)

The gap between the rich and poor is widening. Living standards are stagnating or falling. Insecurity is growing. Many people feel left behind by the forces unleashed by globalisation. They feel powerless in the face of de-regulated corporate power.

Hang on on a minute! Aren't all Corbyn's words above also an

example of “feeding on people’s concerns”? Isn’t Corbyn *feeding on people’s concerns* about “falling living standards”, the “gap between rich and poor”, “insecurity, “globalisation” and “de-regulated corporate power”? More relevantly to this piece, doesn’t Corbyn want to scare people with his nightmares about the “far Right” into voting for a Far Left government ?

Basically, the leader of the Labour Party offers us a traditional Marxist analysis of the current situation. Thus:

1. People aren’t against mass immigration because of the threat of terrorism, the Islamisation of parts of the UK, crime, ghettos, etc.
2. They’re against mass immigration because of “the failures of capitalism”.
3. People aren’t against Muslim grooming gangs because of how they exploit and brutalise young girls.
4. They’re against Muslim grooming gangs because of the *failures of capitalism*.
5. And people aren’t against the EU because it is facilitating mass immigration and subverting our laws.
6. They’re against the EU because of *the failures of capitalism*. And so on and so on.

And when Corbyn say that these “populist parties” have identified many of the “right problems” but that their solutions are “toxic dead ends”, he means that the real solutions should in fact be Marxist/socialist in nature. Thus, after we’ve collectivised, nationalised and massively restricted freedom, then Corbyn’s *Utopia in the UK* will flourish.

Again, Corbyn talks about how the capitalist “substructure” is to blame for, well, literally *everything* bad. He also tells us

that our economics and politics have “failed” and that only a pure and historically-blameless socialism can solve all our problems. This, [in Corbyn’s own words](#), is the solution:

. . . unless progressive parties and movements break with a failed economic and political establishment, it is the siren voices of the populist far right who will fill that gap.

Prince Hussein

Now take the case of Prince al-Hussein

[Prince Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein](#)—a Jordanian of the Hashemite tribe (which traces itself back to Muhammed)—once called various right-wing Western politicians [“demagogues and political fantasists”](#). Mr Hussein did so while addressing a security conference in The Hague.

Prince al-Hussein included Geert Wilders, Donald Trump and Nigel Farage in his very broad and very political generalisations. However, he singled out the Dutch leader, Geert Wilders, as an especially bad “bigot”.

Prince al-Hussein (once the United Nation’s High Commissioner for Human Rights) went into more detail when he spoke at the inauguration of the United Nation’s [Peace, Justice and Security Foundation](#). Firstly, he said that he was speaking directly to Geert Wilders and his “acolytes”. Indeed he was

speaking to all the “populists, demagogues and political fantasists” who inhabit Europe and America.

Prince Hussein [continued](#):

I am a Muslim, who is, confusingly to racists, also white-skinned; whose mother is European and father, Arab. And I am angry, too, because of Mr Wilders’ lies and half-truths, manipulations and peddling of fear.

Isn’t it hugely ironic, then, when European political/economic elites and Arab princes (in this case) cast disparaging remarks about “populists” and “populism”?

Prince al-Hussein returned to his themes of populism and Mr Wilders. He said that the [Party for Freedom](#)’s (PVV’s-Wilders’ party) manifesto was “grotesque” and that Wilders has much in common with Donald Trump, Hungary’s Viktor Orban and Ukip’s Nigel Farage. Moreover, he called for decisive political action to be taken against populism and patriotism. (Whatever could he have meant by that!)

Mr Hussein also warned his audience that such racism and populism could easily and quickly descend into “colossal violence”. So Prince al-Hussein finished off his speech with the [following words](#):

Are we going to continue to stand by and watch this banalisation of bigotry, until it reaches its logical

conclusion?

Yet the only places in which there is colossal violence nowadays is in largely Muslim countries.

The People and the Elite

It's easy to agree with one of the accounts of "the people" in which it's said that "the people" is seen as being both ["homogeneous and virtuous"](#). (As already hinted at in the introduction.)

Then again, the Left can't have a problem with this because groups like Hope Not Hate, [Stand Up To Racism/Socialist Workers Party](#), etc. are always saying ["don't let \[x\] divide us"](#). In other words, the Left, like the Right, often stresses the people's homogeneity and virtue at the expense of vices of the elite. However, the Left and Right will of course select different groups to homogenize.

Having said that, there's one interpretation of the words "the people" that we shouldn't have a problem with. That's the idea that ["the people are sovereign"](#). Yes, it is right and proper that the state/government's decisions should take account of the population as a whole and "the people" should not be ignored. However, this too, admittedly, is a vague position to advance.

So despite the fact that "the people" is an abstraction, we

can still ask:

If the people aren't sovereign, then who (or what) is?

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The *elite*? Yes, here we have another abstract noun. Nonetheless, there are indeed institutions and individuals who treat *the People* with contempt and suspicion. And this has been the case throughout recorded history.

The Elite

So just as "the people" can be reified, so too can *the elite*. After all, why speak of "the elite", rather than "elites" in the plural? The *elite* can encompass individuals and institutions in politics, culture, economics, the media, the arts, etc. This means that it's difficult to see this mishmash as a homogeneous entity. That, however, doesn't automatically rule out cross-cooperation and alliances of various kinds between the different *elites* (in the plural). However, it's also possible—and actual—that different individuals and institutions in the elites vie for power and also have different political values or ideologies. (There's also the seemingly trivial but important reality of clashes of personality or ego.)

There's also the situation of "anti-elitist" individuals and groups gaining political power. Those on the Left have stressed that this happened in the case of Donald Trump. And, possibly, Jeremy Corbyn may gain power in the future too. So what happens then? Do these anti-elitists become new elites? The Bolsheviks, to take one example, certainly became an elite a very short period of time after seizing power. Having said that, there's a certain sense in which political groups and individuals can't help but become elites after gaining "state power" (to use a Marxist term)—no matter how pure and democratic they were before gaining power.

So some level of elitism, in that sense, unavoidably comes with political power. And then we must also factor in the fact that [power corrupts](#).

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