POPULISM IN A DEMOCRACY: ETHICAL CONCERNS

Columbus Nnamdi Ogbujah, Ph. D.
Department of Philosophy
Rivers State University
Port Harcourt, Nigeria.
ogbujah.columbus@ust.edu.ng

Abstract

The 21st century is an age with twists and turns in political and social permutations and landscape. Every now and then, experts' failure to predict social outcomes are explained away either by blaming their heavy reliance on wrong paradigms in analyzing those events, or by attributing them to a resurgent wave of populism that defies standard gauge in its processes. This paper found that populism has recently become a recurrent feature of most democracies around the world. Whether leftwing, middle or rightwing, its current manifestations are symptomatic of a deeper fault-line in democratic structures. It further noted that left-liberals are wont to highlighting populism's historical association with xenophobic ideologies that opened the door to fascist regimes, and in consequence, are happy to create an atmosphere of fear and trepidation for everyone. But beyond this, and to make a sense of the recent surge in populist leanings, we identified that it has to be assessed within the context of a reaction exposing the messy reality of systemic corruption in our democratic systems. We concluded by pointing out that perhaps, more ruinous to the ethics of liberty, equality and freedom is the apparent attempt at forcible homogenization of left-liberal mantras, which in itself, has become somewhat an ideologue akin to the excesses of populism.
Keywords: populism, left-liberalism, ideology, homogenization, peoplehood.

Introduction

One of the compelling forces bequeathed to the 21st century politics, especially in the West, is liberal democracy. Right from the end of the World War II, Europe and America began a reconstruction not merely of the infrastructures, but of the social fabrics that would reduce ethnic tensions and create a more enduring peace in the world. Liberal democracy was quickly adopted as the most potent vehicle by which these can be achieved. Ever since, the West has not relented in 'exporting' this model to the rest of the world, often without due concern to peculiar local realities—a fact that has led to massive failures and frustrations, but

one which, according to its exponents, is a necessary pathway that blossoms through refinements.

At its trail, fascism crumbled, despots went out of business, and the preponderance of a 'Police State' under the guise of military rule in developing nations, has fast lost credibility. For over a century or so, liberal democratic principles permeated the political spectrum of the West, and structured the refinement of their cultures and socio-economic growth: protecting the interests of citizens, promoting equity, efficiency, firmness and stability, and paving the way for seamless power transitions without the use of violence, etc. But these were not achieved without pitfalls: it has not only placed more emphasis on quantity rather than quality, since it is a game of numbers, it has also led to a waste of time and resources. Oftentimes, countries have lost grounds with time in law formulations and confirmation of executive appointees (like America); others have wasted huge sums of money in electioneering campaigns (America, Nigeria, etc.); while many are governed by a bunch of irresponsible and incompetent people who have no qualms wasting public funds in recreational tours.

The later, coupled with the sleaze of elites, led to the recent global economic meltdown, and its attendant hardships on 'the people'. As if this were not bad enough, the unequal burden caused by neo-liberal austerity measures in response to the economic downturn exposed the messy reality of systemic corruption in our constitutional democracies. Its failure to guarantee equality as the 'measuring rod' for all citizens and institutions is what today has come to be denounced in populism. Thus, renascent populism is a reproof of the malaise of liberal democracy, and a call to revert to one of its constitutive pillars – equal treatment of all in law.

As is expected, most liberals are grandstanding at the new wave of populism, and are wont to creating an atmosphere of trepidation for all by highlighting its past association with xenophobic ideologies that opened the door to fascist regimes. But as the following paragraphs will indicate, beyond the invectives, beyond the façade of the diatribes, the real imports of the recent surge in populist leanings will be lost if we do not gauge it within the context of a reaction exposing the messy reality of systemic corruption in our democratic systems. It is disturbing that perhaps, more ruinous to the ethics of liberty, equality and freedom is the apparent attempt at forcible homogenization of left-liberal

mantras, which in itself, has become somewhat an ideologue akin to the excesses of populism.

Understanding the Hysteria over Populism
No one can contest the constitutive link between populism and *populus* – the people; also, no one can deny that 'the people' are the driving force of various forms of populist manifestations as is in all democratic institutions. But the issue of who or what constitutes the people is significant in delineating the imports of both populism and democracy in social engineering.

The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language (2016) describes populism as 'a political philosophy supporting the rights and power of the people in their quest for liberation from the grip of privileged elite'. This means that populism somewhat espouses 'a rule by the entire people'; a form of grass-root mobilization that seeks to wrest power from the grips of political elites as a result of their mismanagement of the common wealth. We shall adopt this as our 'working definition' since it focuses on populism *per se,* and resists the often one-sided left-right depiction of the subject matter as if it were an exclusive appendage of a specific ideology.

In political history, scholars have used persuasive parlances to deploy the term in loose and varying ways to reference appeals to "the real people", demagoguery and 'inclusive' politics often to influence the attitude of their audience. In sync with appeals to 'the real people', Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008:3) consider it an ideology that "pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous 'others' who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice". The mere classification, in this characterization, of a set of people as 'virtuous' who are pitted against another – 'dangerous' set, is an indication of strong emotive, value-laden predisposition. It is a ploy that diverts attention from the core principles of the drive in order to elicit support for its goals. Similarly, those who classify it as demagoguery are not any less guilty of the same ruse. Müller's (2014) depiction as "a particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world which opposes a morally pure and fully unified, but ultimately fictional people to small minorities who are put outside the authentic people", for instance, falls into this category. Here, Müller dismisses populist claims as fictitious and perhaps, needing no keen attention of any serious minded individual. And people with similar outlook completely

acquiesce with him when they describe it as a 'series of obsessive gestures, an incoherent movement in search of an ideology.'

Studies have shown that populist leanings are not something new in our political landscape (Zoch, 2000). From the ancient Roman Empire to the time of Protestant reformation, and even to the English and French Revolutions, populism has manifested and thrived in varying degrees in all representative democracies. The interwar Italy was in a big economic and political mess, and so was Germany. These led to public discontent and populist uprisings that unfortunately culminated in the fascist and xenophobic regimes of Mussolini and Hitler in Italy and German—a dark period in the history of constitutional democracy. Now and again, these notorious regimes are highlighted by scholars as the only endpoint to every populist match—a view that is largely responsible for much of the hysteria over populism.

Going by the events of the last two decades, one would say that the recent surge in populism has a similar catalyst to the happenings of the early part of the 20th century Europe. Triggered by a global recession of unimaginable magnitude and buoyed by the unequal burden caused by neo-liberal austerity measures in response to it—exposing the widespread corruption in our democratic systems, the spread of populist movements has become the single most important political story of the 21st century. Like nationalism, its forceful re-emergence is a consequence of a flawed system that has for long, not only stifled the growth of the middle and lower classes, but also made them unduly bear the brunt of the wasteful actions of elites.

In the past few decades, globalization has taken the center stage, and the faith of the West on the inexorable global advance of liberal democracy has largely been unchallenged. But recent events are proofs that the operating elements within democracies are not impervious to the dangers and temptations associated with all forms of ideologies. When political actors yield to these temptations, their actions create social disharmony. Social harmony, as we know, is what keeps the gears of a democracy moving. But when there is pervasive injustice, the harmony will be undermined in such a way that eventually disrupts the government itself (Galston, 2018). This is the catalyst to renascent populism. The loss of social harmony has provoked a waning public confidence in core representative institutions. Now and again, politicians are accused of having lost touch with the concerns of ordinary people (Mair 2013, Merkel 2014), caring instead only for themselves and their cronies. There isn't only a decline of socio-economic

wellbeing of the people, but an awful erosion of democratic legitimacy and culture.

Now, since the demand for alternative 'frameworks' or mode of operation is considered as particularly potent in times of deep political distrust (Perrineau, 2014), it becomes all the more compelling to identify the systemic flaws in the operational processes of the 'deep state' as catalysts in re-launching populist leaders and movements in many parts of the world. Simply put, renascent populism "is a symptom of representative democracy's malaise as denunciation of the failure of constitutional democracy to be consistent with its promises of guaranteeing that all citizens enjoy an equal political power and that public equality is the norm leading institutions, politicians, and citizens" (Bellamy and Merkel, 2018). As in every situation, injustice and economic woes are repugnant to human nature, and there is no limit to the extent people can go in redressing such.

Allied to socio-economic problems from within, is the dramatic spectacle of terrorism associated with Islamic extremism, from without. After the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers of World Trade Center (New York, September 11, 2001), and subsequent similar attacks on European capitals, it became a matter of national security for some in the West to readjust their laws and security apparatus to suit the prevailing safety challenges. In much the same way, the continued massacre of Christians, kidnapping for ransom and appropriation of indigenous lands in Southern Nigeria by Fulani terrorists are eliciting populist revolt against a smug leadership that appears to be complicit. In consequence, migrants, who are adjudged to be largely responsible for these crimes, are unduly profiled and frolicked by vigilante groups or boarder patrol officers.

Besides, the liberal left's policy of 'open-boarders' and the vacuously universal citizenship of nowhere is hurting lives at boarder and low income communities, especially in the United States. Illegal immigrants generally do not have the financial capacity to reside in highbrow areas. So, the poorer communities always bear the brunt, which sometimes involves a gross exploitation of both incomers and those already there, aside from urban epidemics of drug-trading, people trafficking, enslavement of women and gang-crime (Milbank, 2017). As a push-back and demand for more protection from their governments, many citizens began to express anti-immigrant and sometimes 'Islamophobic' sentiments that question liberal civil rights, seeking for some kind of protection

in cultural and religious homogeneity. People began to mobilize against any structures that lend credence to these challenges.

In point of fact, nascent populism has created an idea of peoplehood that en-globes a people that are genuinely in need of some form of salvaging from socio-economic, political and security predicaments. But the peoplehood is nationalist in character and in consequence 'particularist' in form: it is of a particular people who feel obliged to disrupt the political *status quo* that has dwindled their fortunes in order to chart a new course for progress; a specific people bonded by their belief in self-determination, and propelled by their activism to wrest powers from those identified as 'corrupt elites.' To the extent that these 'people' pit themselves against others perceived as adversaries, it is termed divisive—a feature for which it has drawn a lot of hysteria especially from left-liberals.

For some critics, it does not matter that creating division and competition are ingredients of every democratic structure—elements without which a democracy turns into authoritarianism. Rather, what matters most is the division arising from a political articulation of peoplehood that resorts to nationalist grounds as a foundation for its legitimacy. This, for them, is what makes populism indefensible within the normative framework of liberal democracy (Wolkenstein, 2016).

Is Populist Livewire in Democracy?
The first step in deconstructing the livewire of populism is to deflect the unnerving influence within elitist discourses—the belief that is sold to the public that populism is an ideology. Second, is to restate the often glossed-over inescapable truth that liberal democracy has no foundation except in the *kratos* – rule, strength of the *demos* – common people. In respect to the first, it is striking but not surprising that populism has so far been analyzed mostly from the normative perspective of liberalism (Canovan, 1999; Arditi, 2004). As such, scholars like Kaltwasser and Hawkins (2016) could very easily presume that despite the very real differences among the populists around the world, they are to be treated as part of the same phenomenon, namely, a people holding a particular ideology with two main features: rejection of the "corrupt elite," and respect for the principle of popular sovereignty. Some other scholars claim the key elements are four (Fleurbaey, 2018); for others, they are five (Engesser et al., 2016), etc. Whatever might be the significance of the numbers, it is easy to notice that this sort of categorization is *red herring* that seeks to box populist sentiments into an unpleasant corner so as to easily dispense with it.

In point of fact, with regard to conceptual framing, the variety of populist contents arguably is much more important than its common leanings. Aside the shared sociological drivers across contexts, the flexible nature of populism enables it to be widely stretched. This is why many authors (Roberts, 2018; Mondon, 2018; Panizz, 2005; Worsley, 1969) have described it as a notoriously elastic and loosely-defined term in the social sciences. And being extremely elastic, it is within reasonable bounds not to situate it strictly within the ambience of an ideological frame. In the main, the only element common to all populists, as Mondon (2018) noted, is the creation of a democratic phoenix rising from its ashes: the 'people'. The people are the source from which emanate diverse forces in the power struggle. Their actions are interpreted within particular modes of articulation of any social, political or ideological contents. As there is no identical mode of articulation, so also there is no unique way of manifestation. This is perhaps, why Canovan (1999) saw it as a 'style' and/or 'mood' rather than an ideology. It is a phenomenon that serves as a tool for all shades of political persuasions, and as such, it would be herculean to identify a 'pure' populist ideology that is not linked to other ideologies. Historically, populism has taken left-wing, right-wing and even centrist forms (Saposs, 1960), and sometimes forms that unite individuals and groups of seemingly diverse partisan views (Wood, 2002).

As a tool, populism becomes handy when a society is ravaged by socio-political malaise such as we identified earlier in the work—financial insecurity, pervasive corruption in the democratic system and terrorism. Every democratic structure has both redemptive/ideal (direct, popular sovereignty) and pragmatic/technocratic (institutions, rules, laws) sides. The 'ideal' indicates that power belongs to the 'common people' and their welfare, as such, is paramount. Without the *demos*—common people, there is no *kratos*—rule of them. Hence, any action, however well intentioned, must not be perceived as conflicting with the will of the common people. On the other hand, the 'technocratic' denotes that institutions are to be manned, and rules interpreted by trained experts. When there is a gap between the promise of power to the people—understood as a capacity to exercise some control over major issues that affect their lives—and the actual performance of existing democracies on issues like participation and the responsiveness of elected representatives (Canovan, 1999), it creates an opening for the rise of populist sentiments. A good understanding of this matrix led Canovan to insist that populism only flourishes when democracy can no longer

sustain the innate tension between its romantic redemptive and cold pragmatic sides.

Perhaps, to wriggle out of this quagmire, one might wish for a 'purely pragmatic democracy' that thrusts itself solely into the cares of burgeoning technocrats who insist on rules and implementation of laws. This, for sure, would amount to using idealistic solutions to fight off realistic contests, since the redemptive part of democracy is crucial to its very existence. In fact, this is what postmodern global societies attempted to do that led to the fallen relevance of the people in decision-making processes, thereby alienating them from the drivers of their common will. It is this sort of articulation of political history that, in part, paved way for the rise in populist ideals. Whenever people feel alienated from the processes that structure their future, they always move to reclaim popular sovereignty. Hence, this redemptive (direct, popular sovereignty) characteristic condemns democracy to having populism as its inseparable companion (Canovan, 1999).

From the foregoing, it is pretty clear that populist livewire is deeply embedded within democratic structures. As a term of self-designation, populism derives a lot of its meaning from its use in the United States by members of the *People's Party*, late in the 19th century (Canovan, 1981). Later on, Urbinati (1998) acknowledged that within the American context, the term was coined to designate both a political language and a form of political participation particular to and consistent with the democratic processes. For him and for many other scholars (Laclau, 2005; Arditi, 2010; Kaltwasser, 2012; Galston, 2018), more than an occasionally temporary spectacle, populism pertains to the very interpretation of democracy. Its character and practice both underline, and in varying degrees consciously derive from, a vision of democracy. The political scientist Mudde (2004) couldn't agree less when he echoed the views of many observers that populism is inherent to representative democracy; that after all, populists juxtapose 'the pure people' against 'the corrupt elite'. As history bears witness, whether in Europe, America, Africa or anywhere else, populism has always emerged to reveal what social conditions and demands are not sufficiently satisfied by democratic systems. For now, it remains the most obvious symptom of 'political malaise' that would continue to pervade the democratic landscape.

The Danger of the Ethics of Forcible Homogenization

One constant reality of life is that if we do not learn from history, it surely will be repeated in the course of time. When we look at implosions ensuing from historical antecedents to forcible homogenization, we cringe at the magnitude of the danger lurking in the horizon. In the course of human civilization, adherents of pre-modern Christian and Islamic faiths regarded their systems of ethics as having been set by a Transcendental Being, and as such are absolute, universal and unalterable. These 'universal and unalterable' qualities, for the most part, structured their beliefs and functional systems.

At some point in time, the European system of political legitimacy centred on the political power of the Vatican. Kings who wanted to succeed and/or remain in power had to make alliances with Rome. With political power and a set of absolute and immutable code of conduct, the Holy Roman Empire sought to homogenize the world's population in her universalist messianic claims. In furtherance of this, she promoted some activities which, to say the least, indirectly gave rise to gross abuse of human rights. But in her grandiose reign, she prided herself as the vanguard for universal human peace.

Similarly, the Habsburg and Ottoman empires, as well as the Soviet one – defined their respective identities in fairly universalist terms (Hadžidedić, 2010). The Ottoman Empire, for instance, structured by its Islamic universalism, engaged in jihads that destroyed millions of lives, claiming at the same time, to be repository of theocratic character. 'From the time of Mohammed,' as Madden (2002) observed, 'the means of Muslim expansion was always the sword'. And this has not halted till this day in many parts of the world, especially in Nigeria where, according to Umeagbalasi (2020), Fulani headers have killed over six thousand Christians since the current government came into power in 2015. Thus, the claims to forcible homogenization of people under some purported universal ethics has always led to human carnage, and are never different in practice from the imperialist/absolutist vision of Hitler or Lenin for a universal world peace.

The spread of populism seems to reveal the futility of the claims to moral rectitude by left-liberal pundits. When scholars like Rooduijn (2016) insist that 'academics have moral obligation to protect liberal democracy', it gives the false narrative that there are no viable alternatives to the current practice of liberalism, if the world were to experience peace and prosperity. This sort of audacious claim is largely responsible for scholars analyzing populism only from the normative perspective of liberalism, and by extension, its projection either as

pathology of, or threat to democracy (Müller, 2016). An intrepid demand of this nature indicates a widespread tendency towards democratic repression when alternatives are sought outside of the existing hegemonic order—a tendency reminiscent of oppressive medieval empires.

Harzony (2016) was very lucid in his identification of the advancement of liberal constructions and demonization of alternatives as a new of form of imperialism that is infatuated with the seeming clarity and intellectual rigor of its vision. For him, much like their ideological predecessors, postmodern liberals too, have their grand theory about how to bring peace and economic prosperity to the world by pulling down all the borders and uniting mankind under their own universal rule. And like other imperialists, they are hasty to display rage and hatred when challenged. This perhaps explains the constant waves of vitriol in the media and college grounds against every form of resistance to their ideals. As we have repeatedly pointed out, left-liberalism has turned the academe, where intellectual diversity and liberty engineered creativity, into 'miniature court houses' that use canons of 'political correctness' to clutter intellectual liberty.

Recently, the venomous attack and eventual censor of Michael Smalanskas for daring to express his Catholic beliefs on marriage in a Catholic institution (Providence College), is suppression gone too far. But Michael is not alone in his experience. Since the *Brexit* vote and the election of President Trump, there have been unprecedented vituperations upon the English and American public and their elected leadership. To denigrate the imports of these historic events, left-liberals claim that only the aged or uneducated supported *Brexit* and Trump. After all, if people have become more rigid and conservative, it is because of their own 'ignorance and naivety' (Collovald, 2004:75), not because their representatives have failed in their task. Such a fixation with claims to high moral grounds is dangerously leading to illiberal closure of democratic space.

Going by the recent survey of Mitchell Langbert (2018) that outlined the disproportionate mean ratio of 10.4:1 in favor of tenured Liberal professors against their conservative counterparts in US Universities, it is not surprising that there is a systematic shutdown in the invitation of conservatives for commencement speeches. Often explained away by college managements as not part of their policy thrust, the reality is that they prefer the rhetoric of motley 'self-arbiters of taste' who seem overtly mobilized to disturb serene academic environment because of dissenting views, than to protect intellectual diversity. That these actions are coordinated and consistent across the vast majority of the academes lives no one under any further illusion on the specter of ideological

conformity hovering over college grounds and social lives in the West. But to their chagrin, these concerted strictures often ricochet, reinforcing populists in their self-styled resolve to 'clean up the swamp' of democratic gunk.

Conclusion
As a non-ideological wave, populism, no doubt, is susceptible to diverse views and beliefs that could be inimical to representative democracy. This is what happens when right-wing populists infuse their drive with 'nativism' and the 'othering' of everyone else not sharing in their views. It always end up in the revival of old-styled *ethnic* nation-states that are discriminatory in character, as against their *civic* and more inclusive alternatives. But populism is beyond mere nativism, as it involves pathways that give 'the people' (demos) more opportunity to determine the course of their lives. It is thus, disingenuous to reduce the reason for current re-launching of populist ideals to illiteracy and incivility, much as it would be to liken neo-liberal hysteria over populism as feckless and irrational.

It is a mark of a progressive spirit to learn from history, not only in order to break new frontiers, but to escape from repeating the mistakes of the past. This is perhaps, why many are wont to receiving populist ethics with trepidation. Kaltwasser (2015: 212) already noted that 'the shadow of the Nazi past is so pervasive that populist discourse faces a very hostile environment.' In consequence, the 'left' is so quick in pouring all forms of expletives on those advancing populist policies, likening them to fascists and Nazis in order to increase appeal across the political spectrum. But now and again, scholars, including those sympathetic to liberal leanings like Ulrike and Poynting (2016) and Rooduijn (2016) acknowledge that the new wave of populism, even as it shares some features, is not the same as fascism. Rather, it is, in large part, a reaction to the insecurities and displacement of neoliberalism in the context of global financial crisis. Thus, historical analogies are good, but when drawn out of context and with the intent to malign, rather than explaining, historical analogies often distort the present, sometimes with devastating consequences. Thanks to this distortion, the sharply divided Western societies are presently at dagger's draw.

When left-liberals decry the rise of political movements which they claim are inimical to democratic structures, the complaints oftentimes are vastly about liberal principles. It is always about asserting liberal universalism against all potentially opposing universalisms, since it is in the nature of universalism to

either eliminate the other or be eliminated by the other (Hadžidedić, 2010). Democracy is about 'majority rule' and political 'equality of citizens.' There is a whole array of liberal principles that are not captured within this core concept of democracy. The enforcement of such principles and the negative consequences of some of them are often the triggers of social disharmony. Today, what is happening in the democratic West is "a conflict between inflamed populism and the ideology of global, technocratic empire" (Reno, 2016). It is a challenge against the burgeoning but exclusionary parameters set by existing (left-liberal) political institutions.

While populism, if not guided by strong institutions, has the potential to create a monster in a ruler, unhinged liberal democracy would create citizens of nowhere with no ethical values and culture. As a matter of fact, it is the failures of the later that led to the re-emergence of the former. Rather than enhancing, the bigoted suppression of opposing views in the media and college campuses is hurting the liberal profile it purports to sell. This hegemonic closure of democratic space is perhaps, more ruinous to the ethics of liberty, equality and freedom than the excesses of contemporary populism roundly criticized. We are just hoping, as did Harzony that, in the end, the head of some universal cosmopolitan empire does not emerge to put up an idol and demand that we all bow down to it.

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