

Democracy and Populisms

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Shortly after the symbolic fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, many believed that democracy had become the impassable horizon of political societies, to use an expression by Jean–Paul Sartre in regard to Marxism–Leninism. In our day, one might wonder whether we have not repeated Sartre’s error, this time not in the context of communism, but rather of representative democracy. To enumerate the shortcomings of this system, which are more or less evident, would be immaterial, almost conformist and not without malicious intent. The author only wishes to point out an alarming sign of this crisis — the progressive rise of movements called “populist” everywhere in Europe, and no doubt in the United States since the election of Donald Trump. Why are these movements gaining power? Are they simply expressing their disapproval of democracy by denouncing the flaws in its functioning, or on the other hand, are they possibly subversive, hence disturbing, precisely because they build on the very foundation of the entire democratic system — the people?

Democracy and the People

Lincoln’s definition of democracy is well–known: government of the people, by the people and for the people. This reference to the people is the very foundation of any system claiming to be democratic, and thus one can speak of the sovereignty of the people whereby the people are accountable ultimately to no one but themselves and recognise no other superior or transcendent reference other than themselves. However, unless one is referring to small communities such as the Swiss cantons which Jean–Jacques Rousseau had in mind, one can easily understand that a direct democracy without intermediaries will prove to be impracticable despite all the dreams or utopias which such a reference does not cease to engender.

Of course, the people cannot rule themselves and so we already have a serious flaw in Lincoln’s definition. Moreover, one cannot forget the heated debates on this issue which divided the men of the French Revolution in the years between

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1789 and 1791 (Furet and Halévi, 1989). Since the people cannot rule themselves directly, they must delegate this power to representatives (Manin, 1995). Then again, how to designate representatives, how to vote, for what length of time, by means of instantly revocable mandates or otherwise, what are the limits of freedom and initiative to be given to these representatives? Above all, who designates them? In other words, who are “the people”? Experienced *patres familias*, responsible proprietors as opposed to peasants or individuals who have neither wealth nor responsibility? All citizens, but not women also. Here again is another flaw in Lincoln’s definition: strictly speaking, no one knows who the people are, what the contours of a people are, who exactly is one of the people (madmen, incarcerated felons, children under the age of reason (?), the elderly in various stages of dementia?) at what age is one eligible to vote for one’s representatives, thus becoming a citizen with full rights — 21, 18, perhaps 16?

Questions such as these arise in every democratic political philosophy (Cousidière, 2016), but even moreso in regard to populisms which will be dealt with subsequently. These questions are directed to the people, but it is clear also that such an appeal may find diverse respondents. Who are the people to whom they are addressed? Which social categories shall be considered? Does one seek to dissociate “the people” from their representatives by creating an opportunity for dissent at a moment when certain populists wish to cast suspicion on the so-called representatives of the people by attempting to expose their treason, cowardice or inefficiency. One could even go as far as to say that this type of “populist” cause is inherent in every democracy, and in a sense, latent in all systems. Moreover, the practice of regular elections, and hence the renewal of deputies, is a sign that the “people” hold primacy over the delegates since they can dismiss or replace them. However, this populism is not exactly of the kind which will be discussed and which threatens our political systems the most.

What are the People?

So, to return to the question of the nature of the people is inevitable: what constitutes the people? What is it that allows us to refer to them as a decisive factor in political life? Evidently, the people are not a “natural” reality subject to an experience of the senses, or which can be encompassed by a definition or clearly comprehended. For the people do not exist outside the realm of laws, regulations, constitutions, that is to say of conventions formulated by men and situated historically, if one is to distinguish “nature” and “convention” in the manner of the Ancient Greeks. However, is any constitution which creates a social bond appropriate? We know that Saint Augustine once remarked that even a group of bandits can make rules, moreover extremely strict rules including all the discipline implied therein, that is, with the authority which can command respect for these rules. However, are these rules just or are they tyrannical, were they established fairly for the good of the group (or the people), or were they made

to justify criminal activity typical of a gang? Can one thus have a people without lawful institutions?

We know the debate initiated by this same Augustine with regard to the definition of the people given by Scipio and Cicero (Augustine, 2012). Both defined the republic as the affair of the people (*res populi*) and the people as “a multitude gathered together by legal consent and in accordance with their interests”, to which Augustine objects saying “where there is no true justice there can be no law”, there are no people, no affair of the people, and thus no republic, but only “a crowd with a cause undeserving of the name”. As regards this definition, the Bishop of Hippo preferred a different one according to which “the people are a multitude of rational beings united by their participation in the things they love”, which would mean that “in order to know what the people are, one must take into consideration the object of their affection”. In this sense, the Roman people were truly a people, and “their cause was the republic”, which held true, indeed, also of the Greeks, the Egyptians and of “any other republic of other nations”. For all loved their city and were able to defend it and to found it upon principles of justice. A nice concession, however immediately nuanced, indeed contradicted, by the claim that “the city of the impious” does not offer sacrifices to God alone, and therefore “the soul has no mastery over the body in a just and conscientious way, nor does reason govern the vices; therefore it is lacking, generally speaking, in true justice”. True justice means giving God what is His due, namely true worship... In the absence of true justice, there are no people, no republic, but only the appearance of justice and the appearance of a republic, hence the appearance of a people.

Since one may claim that populisms, in using Augustine’s latter definition, would be entitled to take advantage of a similar approach to the people and the republic to consolidate their position, let us say here that we are dealing with true populism inspired by the Christian (Catholic) faith: our secularised societies, that is to say, our “impious” democracies — to use Augustine’s term — are systems that are neither truly popular nor truly republican, for they lack religious foundations and give no public recognition to the true worship which is to be rendered to God (to the true God, the God of Jesus Christ, needless to say). Today, only few current political movements will go thus far — still, a certain defence (Hungary, Poland?) of Christianity as the foundation of politics is drawing ever closer to such positions — and by playing on the threat of losing our traditions, have gained the attention of many people, particularly of those who are alarmed by the danger of a “great replacement” of traditional religion in our countries by Islam and by the great number of immigrants marked by this religion.

Be that as it may, one may at least conclude the following: defining the concept of the “people” is a rather difficult venture. Even identifying the “people” with the “nation” leads nowhere, despite the attempt by Abbé Sieyès in his speech of 1789, since again, the question reappears: how to define this fluid historical

entity which is a nation?¹ One must, however, keep in mind that the people are not an entity existing outside the realm of institutional organisation, not without having put in place a legal system which — insofar as possible — will repel violence and thus ensure safety which for Hobbes is the fundamental value of every “commonwealth”, of every “political condition”. Not a single constitution will be the incarnation of justice *per se*, and the illusion nourished by a certain political Augustinianism will be to believe that a reference to religion, as explicitly formulated in a constitution (such as the draft of the Charter of the European Union) will guarantee sufficiently the establishment of a true political community, or that true justice can be identified with the worship which we render the “true” God. In any case, the modern idea of the people cannot allow them to be confined to such perspectives, and we must admit that there is a specifically modern idea of the people which is unlike that of Aristotle and that of Augustine, and without a doubt, unlike Rousseau’s idea of a “sovereignty of the people” while dreadfully mimicking divine or royal sovereignty. Thus, Rousseau conceived the people as an absolute, suppressing the people’s own internal division (rejection of parties by the citizens of Geneva) and giving preference to an indeterminable “general will” (*volonté générale*) against all particular wills destined to disappear in the face of the general will. However, our democratic systems are unique in that they are pluralistic, non homogenous, not unified under one ideology such as Marxism–Leninism, or under one religion (Catholicism, Orthodoxy or Islam), but rather intertwined with different currents of thought as well as political traditions and/or religions.

To stimulate reflection, we may quote a definition of the people by Jacques Maritain, a definition closer to Thomas Aquinas than to Augustine. Maritain writes, “The people are a multitude of human persons, who, united under just laws, by reciprocal friendship, and for the common good of their human existence, constitute a political society or a political body”, “the people being the free and living substance of the political body. The people are above the state, the people are not there for the State, the State is there for the people.” These people are not sovereign in the sense of having full authority over themselves, but they do have a “natural right to full autonomy or self–rule” (Maritain, 1990, p. 510).

Democratic Systems and Populisms

Henceforth, we are ready to better understand the scope and the meaning of populisms which, in our day, seem to have invaded the political arena and persuaded considerably large minorities among the European peoples. They are

1 *Discours sur les droits de l'homme* (July 20, 1789) by Abbé Sieyès: “all public powers without distinction are an emanation of the general will; everything comes from the people, that is to say, from the nation. These two terms must be synonymous” (Furet and Halévi, 1989, p. 1015). Translation by Vesna Borović.

diverse in themselves, and so we must distinguish populisms of the right and populisms of the left, a distinction which they themselves insist upon. Despite their profound differences, they have some common traits. Firstly, both are suspicious of the representatives of our democracies and therefore claim that the people are deprived of the opportunity to govern themselves: important decisions affecting them are made by more or less anonymous large international groups which escape control, or by “Brussels”, a phantom always agitated by anti-European propaganda in European countries, particularly in Eastern Europe, but elsewhere also. The people have lost their autonomy, in Maritain’s words, and see themselves as being exposed to powers that are obscure and heteronomous, hence uncontrolled. Then, and perhaps above all, these populisms set the “real” people against the elites who repeatedly betray them while claiming to know better than they what is good for them. These elites may be experts, technocrats, perpetual politicians who hold seats in parliament for a very long time, who are in some way entrenched while blocking the renewal and rejuvenation of the elites. Not only do the people lose their autonomy, but those that have placed themselves above the people, and even against them, declare that they can lead the people better than they themselves.

Left-Wing Populism, Right-Wing Populism

It is advisable, however, to distinguish between left-wing populism and right-wing populism, irrespective of the common points already mentioned. Self-declared leftist populism has found its philosophical expression in the writings of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe who denounce “the illusion of (democratic) consensus”, hence the illusion of a quest for the common good, or in the words of Maritain, of a reciprocal friendship (Laclau, 1996; 2008; Mouffe, 2016; Laclau and Mouffe, 2009). For, according to them, our societies are marked by fundamental oppositions and irreducibilities which the consensual lie ignores or feigns to ignore. Inspired explicitly by the German constitutionalist (and pro-Nazi) Carl Schmitt, they claim that it is necessary to transform antagonisms into “agonisms”, in accordance with the perspectives of an agonistic democracy, that is to say, a democracy of conflict. As there are no common points between friends and enemies, between “them” and “us”, any search for dialogic communication such as Habermas (1981) sees it, would mean surrender in the face of irreducible oppositions. The distinction between them and us is to be understood in a hegemonial manner, and one must decide who one’s enemies are: for left-wing populism the enemies are the tax havens, multinationals, the world of finance. Between these persons and “us” (the people) neither consensus nor compromise are possible nor desirable, but rather a sort of class war in a new guise. The political program which ensues therefrom, however vague, would thus consist in unifying all victims of the “system”, real and supposed ones, and encouraging demonstrations and rallies, even violent ones, as an expression of discontent, but

always within the framework of democracy (this last point is truly remarkable and commands our attention).

Right-wing populisms demonstrate a completely different logic, but a similar dualism (on the whole, considerably Manichean) is at its base. One can find an expression in the writings of the French philosopher Chantal Delsol which is typical of this tendency (though there are others) (Delsol and Mattéi, 2005; Delsol and Botos 2007; Delsol, 2008; 2015). The difference between “them” and “us” in this type of populism derives from the idea that it is the elites who hold the people in contempt, who portray them as “idiots”, “just as Plato has already identified the masses with mediocrity”, or else they ridicule every form of popular expression cherished by the extreme right. “Current populists [of the right]”, writes Chantal Delsol, “are critical of modern individualism and defend the communitarian values of family, enterprise and civic life” as opposed to the elites who value the “terrorism of the despotism of reason” seeking an illusionary emancipation of the masses while exhausting traditional roots wherein the people discover their reasons to live, their honour, their identity”. The elites impose an abstract ideal, for example a Europe constructed of disappearing nations, and likewise with them their religious and cultural traditions, for the benefit of an anonymous destroyer. Inscribed, in a sense, into the line of thought of a certain Joseph de Maistre, this populism revolts against the abstractions of the Enlightenment and/or of reason which has gone mad as a result of its uprootedness and its contempt for tradition, customs, the past, all references in which the people nevertheless find their vitality and *raison d’être*.² No more than does left-wing populism, this populism does not consider itself antidemocratic; on the contrary, it affirms that it is the elites, particularly the intellectuals, the media, ecologists, the leftists who hold “popular circles” in contempt rather than listening to their demands and honouring their expectations. They are substituting universal imagery for concrete particularities.

These two forms of populism, the presumptions of which are astonishingly antinomic despite their shared suspicion of the elites, seem to be dangerous because they are referring to the fundamental reality of any democracy, namely the “game” between those being represented (the people) and the representatives (the elites). They tamper with a sort of essence of all democracy which by definition cannot be representative. Specific historical events can easily provide justification for their suspicion, as is sufficiently evident in Europe. Demagogy will play overtly in dramatizing this distinction and creating fear among the populations: fear of social decline among the middle classes (which seems to be particularly true in the USA), fear of an invasive globalisation which is easily demonised, fear of migrants or immigrants who have come to disturb the supposed homogeneity of our societies, for the bearers of values apparently or actually different from

2 We may recall the incisive criticisms of Edmund Burke of the French Revolution of 1789 in which he rightly reproaches its lack of respect for tradition, lack of respect which cannot but lead to political impotence and the devastation of society (Burke, 1989).

our own regarding the equality of the sexes, regarding the relationship between the religious and the political, regarding religious freedoms or public expression thereof (we may recall the polemics on the caricatures of Mohammed), furthermore, fear of domination by contemptuous bureaucrats fuelled by populists on the right. Right-wing populism in particular plays on nationalistic sentiment and love for one's country, values deemed a threat by "unpatriotic" officials in Brussels. Perhaps the reason for the success of Brexit can be found herein, and one must add also that populism did not recoil, like any demagoguery, when faced with lies, fake news, exaggerations, anything that helps nourish encapsulation and hence suspicion against the representatives. There is a paradox here which is striking, namely, the people were put on their guard against the elites by the new elites, by new bosses, demagogues, who claim to speak in the name of the people. Nothing new, however, since Aristotle in his *Politics* (E 10, 1310 b 15) has already made a judgement which is entirely up-to-date: "almost all tyrants began by becoming leaders of popular parties who gained the trust of the people by attacking notables". *Quid novi sub sole?* However, the "thinkers" among populist movements constitute a sort of new intellectual elite which provides social movements with an elaborate or learned form, movements which do not fail to exploit political leaders, as one can see in Austria or in Italy etc.

The new element here perhaps would be that one could assume that the all-powerful new elite is henceforth disguised, invisible, that "they" will not always be clearly detectable and discernible. The global expansion of digitalization and artificial intelligence allows for unprecedented control of the populations (China represents a frightening "model" for it persecutes its dissidents abroad!) The Cambridge Analytica and Facebook scandals (March 2018) perfectly illustrate the hidden dominance and manipulation by the new disguised powers. Moreover, these new technologies are used in international relations with the intention of manipulating election campaigns, to influence minorities which can reverse election results (Russia is exerting an influence on parties of the extreme right and financing them shamelessly). Thus our democracies are in great danger, for the "people" are unwittingly being manipulated and are ready to "give themselves up" to their leaders who have very little in common with genuine democratic representatives of the people. This game being played with minorities so as to push them in a direction predetermined by obscure powers (Facebook, foreign countries etc.) constitutes another form of populism in which people are played off against each other, in reality against their real interests, hence against the common good. In a sense these phenomena justify advanced criticism from both sides, both by left-wing populism and by right-wing populism!

At the end of this quick survey, the question remains as to how it is possible to truly defend democracy, the institutions which protect our liberties, our constitutional states and lastly, our future? No doubt there are no other available solutions but for those which are always promoted: education of the people, refraining from contempt, refraining from aggrandization such as in left-wing populism, but developing a core conviction that every citizen is obliged to educate him or

herself in regard to acquiring the means for assuming responsibility, to maintain a critical spirit which can eradicate lies and not to let oneself be misled by the propaganda of the demagogues.

A great endeavour which demonstrates also that democracy is not so much a well-established and indestructible system, but rather a task constantly to be undertaken and which is never assured of success and permanence. Educational systems, schools and universities have a central role to play in the formation of responsible and critical citizens; one might say that these systems themselves are in a state of crisis, which is undoubtedly partially true. However, education is not to be left only to schools: it must come also from the family, the Church, various associations through which a child is raised, instructed and learns the fundamental givens about community life, opens itself to the world such as it is with the desire to live in it, thus to transform it into a world with more justice and prosperity. For education implies also that civil society, hence the people, assumes responsibilities at the most basic levels where the people can act, demonstrate their inventiveness and undertake transformation in a precise way. The principle of subsidiarity promoted by the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church, states nothing different: if our democracies would encourage initiative at the basic level (community, cities, regions etc.), they would be combatting the idea that everything depends on “them”, the distant and contemptuous elite; our democracies would make it clear to the people that democracy does not happen only through the people’s representatives, but that every citizen can and must be active. Much is accomplished when people take interactive initiatives (panels, local associations, self-help, diverse forms of participative democracy). What comes to light is the fact that the people are not a disordered multitude, but rather are constituted by forging themselves. This cannot be done other than through education for reason and for community life and also by the people’s assuming their share of responsibility. Democracy does not merely consist in delegating powers (of representation), but also in concrete action exerted through the “capabilities” of citizens. There is still much in this domain which remains to be discovered in order that democracy may be brought to life.

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