



Populism in Christian perspective



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The decades following the American Civil War were difficult ones for ordinary working people and labour unrest began to reshape the political landscape. Feeling increasingly marginalized in a developing manufacturing economy, industrial workers and poor farmers alike began to abandon the two major political parties and sought relief elsewhere. In 1892 the upstart People's Party (also known as the Populist Party) nominated James G Weaver to stand for the presidency against the Republican and Democratic candidates.¹ The very name of the party and movement suggested that its supporters stood with 'the people' (hereafter The People) against the big-city élites, the railroads and the eastern moneyed interests thought to wield disproportionate influence in the corridors of power.

Although the People's Party did not long endure as a major player in the partisan arena, populism as a movement has been with us ever since and shows no signs of abating. While populism might be considered a uniquely American phenomenon, rhetorical references to The People have a more universal allure. Moreover, because the very notion of The People is so terribly nebulous, appeals to them are almost always associated with an over-extension of personal executive power.

What is populism?

How do we recognize populism when we see it? If leadership is a feature of every polity, as we shall see below, then how do we distinguish a populist leader from a nonpopulist leader? After all, a leader is a leader is a leader. Much of the distinction has to

do with the rhetoric he or she employs along the path to power.

More significantly, populism in no way commits a candidate to a specific political program. Although the original Populists wanted to abandon the gold standard and favoured government control of transportation and communication, their populist successors could easily accommodate any number of policy options under the vague rubric of reform. Some observers believe that populism is a phenomenon of the left, because of its anti-establishment orientation – establishments apparently considered always to be on the right. Others position populism itself on the right, especially if the distrusted establishment is a progressive one attempting to break ordinary people of their allegiances to habits and usages it deems backward and regressive. In this respect populism is impeccably bipartisan, willing to strike out in any direction in defence of the people.

The ancients already understood that appeals to the people could be a clever means for demagogues to claim power for themselves and to wreak havoc on a polity. In the fifth-century BC Athens was a direct democracy in which all citizens gathered together to rule the city state. Sounds wonderful in theory, but Pericles, 'the first citizen of Athens',² used his oratorical skills to persuade his fellow citizens to attack Sparta, an ill-conceived venture that led to a full generation of war and a devastating plague that ended disastrously for Athens. Because of this outcome and because the Athenian assembly had put to death his beloved mentor Socrates, Plato

warned that democracy, far from being a good form of government, was but a prelude to tyranny, the final stage in the degeneration of a political constitution. Plato believed that The People had no special political wisdom, which was more likely to be found in the statesman who had received a philosophical education.

The élitist character of political life

In the present era, when democracy is identified with all things right and good, many will be uncomfortable with the reality that, in a profound sense, political life is intrinsically élitist. Although democracy is generally defined as the rule of the people, it nevertheless requires an organised political system with specialized differentiated offices conferring authority over greater or lesser numbers of citizens.³ Even the most participatory of systems requires specific agents to maintain it and keep it going. The people rule only indirectly through elected representatives in legislative and (sometimes) executive bodies. Though some, such as anarchists, might object to this state of affairs, the very nature of community means that a few people will lead while the majority follow. The ability to co-ordinate action in a large group of people gathered for specific purposes could conceivably be satisfied by a vote of the whole based on majority rule. But the decision to act generally presupposes deliberation among several actors. The larger a body becomes, the more difficult it will be to incorporate everyone into the conversation. Thus in our political systems, we vote to place in a parliamentary body representatives from different perspectives who will debate the merits and drawbacks of concrete policy proposals, the specifics of which will likely elude most of us.

Yet if leadership is a *sine qua non* of human life together, there is the persistent danger that political rulers will lose touch with those they are called to lead, and this is what fuels populism in its various manifestations. The Greeks and Romans recognized that monarchs and aristocrats alike can become self-serving at the expense of the general public. The historical record is filled with episodes in which rulers misgovern their subjects, followed by popular revolts against these rulers. The annals of the ancient world, including the Bible, are filled with the exploits of tyrants and oligarchs preying on their own people (e.g. 1 Kings 21). In 1 Samuel 8, the eponymous prophet warns the people of Israel what will be imposed on them if he accedes to their request for a king.

By the time King Solomon dies and his son Rehoboam succeeds him, Solomon's one-time servant Jeroboam raises a revolt of the northern tribes against the house of Judah, which had unjustly imposed forced labour on them (1 Kings 12). Thus was the kingdom divided for the next two and a half centuries. Nevertheless, far from producing just governance, Jeroboam and his

successors proved to be as bad as, and often worse than, Rehoboam's successors.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Americans read these biblical narratives and saw immediate relevance to themselves and their own communities. Eric Nelson relates that, in the years

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leading up to the outbreak of hostilities in 1775, American leaders were content to appeal to the King over what they viewed as a usurping British Parliament meddling in colonial affairs over which it had no proper jurisdiction. But once Thomas Paine had published *Common Sense* the following year, explicitly citing Samuel's warnings against monarchy, Americans turned en masse against kingship and declared independence only months later.⁴ Once the war had been won and the new country's leaders met to draft a constitution, they composed a preamble whose words would set the tone for the new nation: '*We the People* of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, *do ordain and establish* this Constitution for the United States of America.' (emphasis mine)

Of course, the people themselves did nothing of the sort. They were busy farming, manufacturing and trading, attending to their families and local communities, going to church, and all the other ordinary things that people were doing at the time. They may have been dimly aware of what their political leaders were up to in far off Philadelphia, but it didn't impinge on their lives to any great extent – at least in the short term. Nevertheless, '*We the People*' would become a powerful expression of the American spirit and would come to resonate in the hearts of subsequent generations. It would be quoted against entrenched and remote political establishments too comfortable in their positions of power. Whereas many country's constitutions were considered treaties among politicians, America's constitution belonged to The People, whose responsibility it was to guard it jealously in the face of self-appointed or even duly-elected leaders.

Assessing populism and democracy

What shall we as Christians make of populism? It can be a powerful weapon in the long political battle for justice, especially for the disadvantaged. Nevertheless, it is a two-edged sword that can just as easily be wielded for ill. Some observers of a

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1. Although Weaver lost the election, he received 8.5% of the vote and 22 electoral votes in five states.

2. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, II.65.

3. See, e.g., the argument of DT Koyzis, *We Answer to Another: Authority, Office, and the Image of God* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014).

4. E Nelson, *The Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

5. 'Peter Berger and the Making of a Sociologist', *BU Today*, 19 July 2011, <https://www.bu.edu/today/2011/peter-berger-and-the-making-of-a-sociologist/>

6. YR Simon, *Philosophy of Democratic Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 106.

more conservative mindset may assume that The People retain a purity and essential goodness of spirit demonstrating their superiority over their leaders. The recently deceased American sociologist Peter Berger once observed that 'India is the most religious country in the world, Sweden is the most secular country in the world, and America is a country of Indians ruled by Swedes.'⁵ It is not difficult to see the populist influence in this statement. The more orthodox Christians who believe that America is travelling the wrong path typically blame secularizing élites for the country's predicament, keeping their faith in the innate goodness of The People. Democracy is the obvious answer, as the people rise up to unseat these leaders.

Recently, however, matters have been looking more complicated. One cannot simply blame political leaders for the direction of an entire culture. George Bernard Shaw was perhaps more realistic in his observation that 'Democracy is a device that ensures we shall be governed no better than we deserve.' An overstatement perhaps. Yet it is true that political institutions and leaders alike are conditioned by a complex of cultural assumptions characterising the polity as a whole. A people accustomed to autocracy is very likely to be ruled by autocrats. A nation whose people are corrupt in their daily lives are highly unlikely to be governed by leaders careful to avoid conflict of interest in the conduct of public affairs.

What can we take away from this?

First, there is no such thing as The People understood as a responsible agent with a single voice. Yes, there are people in the plural, who fill a variety of authoritative offices relevant to the different and overlapping communal settings claiming their attention and allegiance. They are at once mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, employers, employees, members of labour unions and workplace communities, church members and citizens. Significantly, these people are animated by different religious worldviews incapable of being easily harmonized in the public square. Does our world belong to God (or the gods) or to ourselves to do with as we please? Try as we might, we cannot exclude such a question from our shared life together, because how we answer it inexorably affects the policy process in any number of ways.

We can, of course, speak of the citizenry or the electorate, the community of members of a state taken as a whole for purposes of voting. Yet even in their capacity as citizens, we cannot assume them to have a unified will. Citizens bring to their public responsibilities the commitments nurtured in the nonpolitical spheres of life. 'The People have spoken' thus means nothing more than that a possibly slight majority has rendered a particular decision for perhaps vastly different reasons.

Second, while we would not wish to follow Plato in rejecting democracy, we should be exceedingly wary of the over-democratization of any political system. Attempting to bring the grassroots into the details of policymaking risks stretching ordinary people beyond their own fields of competence and perhaps outside their actual interests. One-time presidential aspirant Al Smith once said that the cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy. Not so. As philosopher Yves R Simon once put it, 'even a democracy requires nondemocratic elements if it is to survive, much less flourish.'⁶

Earlier this year Donald Trump confounded the pundits and made it to the Oval Office. His election is a byproduct of reforms adopted by the two major parties in the early 1970s whereby The People would be directly responsible for nominating their parties' respective standard bearers without the necessary vetting processes in place before these 'reforms'. Trump successfully appealed to a huge segment of disaffected Americans, but his ability to govern is hampered by his lack of experience in a complex and interdependent constitutional system requiring considerably more than a simple popular mandate. Those attracted to populist candidates may have to consider the possibility that outsider status may be a liability and a hindrance to doing public justice in a diverse polity.

Third, investing our hopes in a nebulous entity called The People runs the risk of idolatry, which the Bible portrays as the original sin and the origin of all others. Our first parents in the garden were tempted to esteem themselves gods and were punished for their presumption. We have been following in their footsteps ever since. We do not generally think of idolatry as applicable to political life, but we ignore its relevance to our peril. Liberals esteem too highly individual freedom and the right to choose, often at the expense of the communities of which individuals are part and of the ordinary political considerations needed for doing justice in a diverse national community. Nationalists effectively worship the nation, to which they subordinate such other communities as families, churches, workplaces, neighbourhoods, business enterprises and labour unions. Similarly populists are tempted to make an idol of The People, seeing in it the fount of all wisdom and righteousness and blind to the possibility of miscarrying justice in its name. Worshipping a false god inevitably leads to a distorted life, including life together in community. Populism and tyranny often go hand in hand, something which Samuel understood in his day and which has played itself out in the historical record time and again.

If, on the other hand, we recognize the importance of the office of citizen as entailing active membership in the body politic, yet without assuming that majorities are necessarily infallible, we shall better move into the future with our eyes open to the dangers and possibilities alike for seeing that public justice will be done.