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Populism and Democratic Conflict: An Aristotelian View

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Abstract: Populism has lately become a matter of concern in both popular and academic circles. Yet contemporary writers have had difficulty parsing populism's relationship to democracy, partly because they are universally committed to the latter. It is worth turning to a thinker like Aristotle, who—despite not explicitly addressing populism itself—is able to reflect clearly on various democratic phenomena that we tend to consider populist, because he does not share our normative or analytical assumptions about democracy. Aristotle's discussions in books 3 and 4 of the *Politics* allow us to see that what we call populism is a function of a broader problem of class conflict in democracies. In light of this analysis, we can see populist movements not as an external challenge to the democratic regime, but rather as a characteristic expression of a recurring dispute over the contours and prerogatives of the people.

Over five hundred years ago, Machiavelli likened the voice of the people to the voice of God, and since then we have been wrestling with the consequences of that popular voice.[1] Indeed, one can view much of the history of the intervening period in terms of the increasing centrality of that people's voice to political life around the world. As the historical sociologist Andreas Wimmer put it, a new conception of the people replaced "the Grace of God as the center around which political discourse draws its

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[1]Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1.58; cf. chapter 20 of Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

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circles."[2] And though Americans think of their Constitution as an exceptional document, few realize just how ubiquitous such references to "the people" are among the constitutions throughout today's world, from Albania to Vanuatu.[3]

But it seems the people have become a problem. Almost two decades ago, Margaret Canovan lamented that populism, though an emerging phenomenon in world politics, continued to go unrecognized by political theorists.[4] By now, however, it is clear enough that political theorists—not to say citizens—take populism seriously.[5] While some disagreement remains, a general consensus has emerged that populism is a democratic phenomenon that relies upon a highly moralized divide between the many—that is to say, the people—and the few, represented as a shifting coterie of elites.[6] The consensus ends, however, when we ask how to evaluate populism and understand its causes. Admittedly, part of the trouble stems from the "thinness" of the concept—in Chantal Mouffe's words, "Populism is not an ideology or a political regime, and cannot be attributed to a specific programmatic content."[7] But the more significant point of confusion has to do with populism's ambiguous relationship with democracy. As Jan-Werner Müller has acknowledged: "Many times evocations of populism only seem to serve the purpose of criticizing something else: the supposed rise of 'post-democracy,' for instance, or the failings of allegedly 'rationalist liberalism.' In other words:

[2]Andreas Wimmer, *Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict: Shadows of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2.

[3]For a summary overview, see Stuart Brown, "The Sovereignty of the People," in *Studies on Locke: Sources, Contemporaries, and Legacy*, ed. Sarah Hutton and Paul Schuurman (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 45–57.

[4]Margaret Canovan, "Populism for Political Theorists?," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9, no. 3 (October 2004): 241–52.

[5]Nadia Urbinati, "Political Theory of Populism," *Annual Review of Political Science*, no. 22 (2019): 6.1–6.17 provides a useful overview.

[6]Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Similarly, Jan-Werner Müller has argued that populism posits a value-laden distinction between the authentic, deserving many and the corrupt, impure few in *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). For more popular treatments, see Fareed Zakaria, "Populism on the March: Why the West Is in Trouble," *Foreign Affairs* (November–December 2016); and Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger & How to Save It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018). Qualified supporters of populism, like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, do not necessarily dispute this point but view this antagonism as salutary for an egalitarian and democratic Left—see Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005) and Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018). On the other hand, Paul A. Taggart, *Populism* (Open University Press, 2000) has argued that populism requires a leader of often extraordinary wealth and charisma to give voice to the people. And so on.

[7]Chantal Mouffe, "The Populist Moment," *openDemocracy*, November 21, 2016.

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populism . . . is an outright pathology itself, but, more important, it is a symptom of what might be wrong with democracy or, more likely, liberalism."[8] Discussions of populism, in other words, are a way of talking about the defects or flaws of democracy without talking about democracy. Such contemporary treatments of the subject are compromised by our proximity to the phenomena—not just to populism but to democracy itself. It is, after all, rare to see a theorist outside the political fringe who is prepared to offer an analysis from outside of our shared democratic commitments.[9] The fish cannot see the water.

If we are unable to think concretely about democratic problems through contemporary language, it may benefit us to return to a thinker who is not so constrained. One of the earliest considerations of democracy within a more comprehensive survey of political possibilities, Aristotle's *Politics*, is particularly relevant here. Margaret Canovan has called populism "a shadow cast by democracy itself."[10] And while Aristotle does not speak of populism (a term for which there is no direct corollary in his linguistic context), he has much to say about the original forms of democracy, unclouded by certain theoretical and practical innovations of contemporary political life.[11] Indeed, few thinkers in the history of political though have so thoroughly reflected on the political practices of democratic regimes and on their particular modes of conflict.

Aristotle can specifically help us think more clearly about populism, because he is not wedded to assumptions concerning the legitimacy of modern democracies, which blind us to the ever-present reality of class conflict. The most consequential of these assumptions relates to popular sovereignty. Under ideal conditions of popular sovereignty, this kind of class conflict is not supposed to happen; for the kinds of political divisions that populism reflects are not a theoretical feature of modern democratic societies in which the entire citizenry is understood to be equal. Thus, our abstract assumptions about how modern democracies are constituted and legitimized mask these kinds of conflict, and contemporary theorists who so often share those assumptions cannot guide us effectively.

[8]Jan-Werner Müller, "'The People Must Be Extracted from Within the People': Reflections on Populism," *Constellations* 15, no. 4 (2014): 484.

[9]This is not to say that antidemocratic prejudices may not exist in mainstream channels, only that they are rarely made explicit.

[10]Margaret Canovan, "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy," *Political Studies* 47 (1999): 3.

[11]For two impressive recent examples of how Aristotle's political thought is relevant to contemporary democratic concerns, see Danielle Allen, *Arguing with Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and Paul W. Ludwig, *Rediscovering Political Friendship: Aristotle's Theory and Modern Identity, Community, and Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

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Besides not sharing our theoretical assumptions about the basis for democracy, Aristotle also does not share our normative commitments to democracy as the highest good. He is thus a more clear-eyed observer. Consequently, he is able to discuss factionalism (*stasis*) and class conflict directly—and though he hardly endorses them, he does not and need not treat them as extraordinary phenomena for a democratic regime.

We will first endeavor to explain why the historical differences matter and why it is so useful to turn to a thinker who does not share our presuppositions, before considering how Aristotle's specific discussions of democratic regimes can help us think about "populist" conflicts as a normal if not always desirable part of democratic political life. Understood in light of Aristotle's discussions in the *Politics*, much of what we refer to as "populism" is simply a resurgence of democratic politics itself. And discussions of populism tend to be proxies for our fears (or, in some cases, hopes) concerning democratic politics. The response to this is not, however, to simply embrace populism as a requisite of our commitment to democracy, but rather to continue to develop a more robust and clear-eyed account of democracy in our time, just as Aristotle did in his.

The People Then and Now

Before taking up Aristotle's account of democracy, and particularly its tendencies toward different forms of class conflict, it is necessary to identify the ways that our understanding of democracy differs from his, above all when it comes to the concepts of representation and popular sovereignty. For both of these make particular—if not always explicit—warrants about the people in a democracy. If populism after all is about the people, then who exactly is the people?

I contend that the prevailing understanding of modern democracy is premised upon ideas of popular sovereignty that confuse attempts to examine certain kinds of political conflict within a democracy. Cas Mudde has noted that populism is at once "a set of ideas that not only depicts society as divided between 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' but also claims that politics is about respecting popular sovereignty at any cost."[12] In other words, populism posits an essential form of social conflict, while at the same time insisting on a foundational concept—popular sovereignty—that disallows such conflict. Because the concept of popular sovereignty is premised upon the unity and homogeneity of the people, it seems to rule out the possibility of genuine class conflict. After all, against whom can the people mobilize if everyone is the people? In order for populism to take

[12]Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Studying Populism in Comparative Perspective: Reflections on the Contemporary and Future Research Agenda," *Comparative Political Studies* 51, no. 13 (2018): 1669.

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hold, then, "the people must be extracted from within the people," as Claude Lefort put it.[13]

The people, as we understand it today, is at once popular *and* national: we are all members of the people, and we are distinct from other peoples.

> Democracy means rule by the people. But in modern times *the people* has come to mean two things. The first is what the Greeks meant by their word *demos*. This means the ordinary people, the mass of the population. So democracy is rule by the ordinary people, the masses. But in our civilization the people also means "nation" or another Greek term, *ethnos*, an ethnic group—a people that shares a common culture and sense of heritage, distinct from other peoples.[14]

For in the modern sense, the people formally constitutes the entirety of the citizenry of a given state.[15] Indeed, under the contractual model of statehood, they are the state's raison d'être. Under this theory, the state exists to safeguard the rights and interests of an imagined prepolitical community—the people—that generates it, and this in turn is the source of its legitimacy. This conceptual relationship between the people and its government, otherwise known as popular sovereignty, today characterizes much of political life as we know it, even in nondemocracies.[16]

As Daniel Lee puts it:

> The doctrine of popular sovereignty emerged in [the] early modern context to show that the constitutive function of sovereignty requires that its form must always be, without exception, popular: state sovereignty originates and always remains with the people . . . because of the view that the unity of the state . . . depended entirely upon the anterior unity of the people, rather than the other way around. Statehood, in short, presupposes peoplehood.[17]

This is to say that we place the people at the origins of modern government: a given people establishes the state and authorizes its mechanisms to operate on their behalf. And, of course, this "people" contains all the people (and not just the poor). And not for nothing does populism get much of its

[13]Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), 88.

[14]Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3. On the question of the relationship of the polis to the nation, cf. Jonathan M. Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) with Edward E. Cohen, *The Athenian Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[15]The tension between this theoretical account of the people as a holistic body and the more variegated and, in many cases, multicultural reality is a recurring theme in the history of modern political conflict.

[16]E.g., the *People's* Republic of China.

[17]Daniel Lee, *Popular Sovereignty in Early Modern Constitutional Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 12.

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charge from the claim to represent this authentic and original people who are the true legitimizing body for state authority.

By contrast, Aristotle's account of the evolution of the polis is teleological. For Aristotle, the polis is preceded by any number of prepolitical communities or groups which come together for largely pragmatic, and in fact common, reasons—principally to gain increased security and prosperity (1252b5–7).[18] The existence of these prepolitical communities is easily recognizable, but also somewhat arbitrary. That is to say, the prepolitical community one's forebears adhered to prior to the consolidation of the existing polis is not the source of political legitimacy for the polis. As Aristotle famously puts it, "while coming into being for the sake of living, it exists for the sake of living well" (1252b8; see also 1278b3). This does not mean that nonpolitical distinctions had no significance—Ionians, for example, distinguished themselves from Dorians—only that these distinctions were not coextensive with the political community as such.[19]

Of course, for reasons that are not difficult to grasp, the ancient polis—and to some degree the larger sphere of the Hellenic world of poleis—is often imagined as either a forerunner to the modern state or an approximate ideal to which we might liken ourselves.[20] It was, after all, an autonomous community of citizens capable of governing themselves at home and wielding and executing organized violence abroad. Moreover, it was defined by its regimes or constitutions, the different types of which remain very much in usage in our own political discourse today, as the typology of regimes (*politeiai*) presented in the classic works of political thought has been transposed from the context of the polis to that of the modern state. But the classical regime—that is, constitution—was literally constitutive of the polis.[21] As Aristotle puts it, when the regime changes, the polis itself changes (1276a40–b3). By contrast, today we imagine the state as an enduring entity that can undergo, as it is commonly called, "regime change" while remaining

[18]Bekker numbers are given in-text throughout. All references are to *Aristotle's Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[19]By the same token, the (literally) ancestral ties of colonists to their mother cities did not preclude them from rebelling, on the basis of being distinct political communities.

[20]For useful discussions of what the polis was and was not, see Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 30–32; Moses Finley, "The Ancient City: From Fustel de Coulanges to Max Weber and Beyond," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 19, no. 3 (1977): 305–27; M. H. Hansen, "*Kome*: A Study in How the Greeks Designated and Classified Settlements Which Were Not *Poleis*," *CPC Papers* 2 (1995): 45–82; Clifford Ando, "Was Rome a *Polis*?," *Classical Antiquity* 18, no. 1 (1999): 5–34; Robin Osborne, *Demos: The Discovery of Classical Attika* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 6–14; and Oswyn Murray, "What Is Greek about the Polis?," in *Polis and Politics: Studies in Ancient Greek History*, ed. P. Flensted-Jensen et al. (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2000).

[21]Paul A. Rahe, "The Primacy of Politics in Classical Greece," *American Historical Review* 89, no. 2 (1984): 265–93.

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fundamentally itself. Spain, for example, could transition from a Francoist dictatorship to a monarchy under Juan Carlos to a parliamentary monarchy all in the span of a few years, without anyone supposing it had become another country altogether. In this sense, the rulers of an oligarchy were loyal not to the enduring body of the state as such (for such a thing hardly existed in ancient Greece), but to their particular oligarchic regime, and they derived their status not through impersonal offices, but in their capacity as rulers of their particular polis.[22] The same went, mutatis mutandis, for democrats.

Indeed, it is above all the concept of democracy, so central to the development of modern states, that creates a false sense of continuity with the ancient polis.[23] For democracy today no longer refers to the rule of the political community by the popular faction, but to the constitutive basis for legitimate government in *any* state. Most contemporary authoritarian states, after all, do acknowledge the entirety of the people as the legitimate basis for state authority, even if they do not enjoy participation in ruling. And where the people do so participate, in democratic states, rule of the people is said to be in their entirety, not just in their capacity of dominant party.

By contrast, the Greek poleis featured built-in political divisions that rendered ambiguous just who constituted the "people." "Ancient democracies never turned the idea of the people (*demos*) into a representation of the community as a whole, as opposed to its less wealthy majority."[24] Having since turned that idea of the people into a representation of the community as a whole—and, moreover, having established impersonal offices and institutions to represent that community—we today have difficulty theorizing about the kinds of political divisions that were a constitutive feature of ancient democracies.

One way to think about the problem of modern populism is that it represents a dilemma in Hobbesian liberalism.[25] Hobbes stabilizes the idea of the people while denying its members access to the deliberative and disputatious practices of political life (which threaten to destabilize it). But while the

[22]See Matthew Simonton, *Classical Greek Oligarchy: A Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

[23]J. S. Richardson, "Imperium Romanum: Empire and the Language of Power," *Journal of Roman Studies* 81 (1991): 1. Though cf. Josiah Ober, *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 8–10 for the claim that modern democracies and ancient self-governing city-states remain comparable forms of political organization.

[24]Bernard Yack, "Reconciling Liberalism and Nationalism," *Political Theory* 23, no. 1 (1995): 176. See also Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 6–7. That is not to say that this way of describing democracy was wholly foreign to the Greeks—cf. the speech of Athenagoras in Thucydides 6.39 (though note that the speaker here is depicted as a demagogue).

[25]Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 85. See also Harvey C. Mansfield Jr., "Hobbes and the Science of Indirect Government," *American Political Science Review* 65, no. 1 (1971): 100.

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Hobbesian covenant is intended to bypass political controversy, it is in retrospect unsurprising that the composition of the people who form that covenant might itself become a subject of controversy; hence, populism. In sum, populism is necessarily a modern concept, because it derives from the modern idea of democratic popular sovereignty. And yet, class conflict in its various forms was a recurring feature of ancient democracies, and in practice it displays substantial overlap with the dynamics of modern populism in ways that merit attention.

The discussion thus far hardly exhausts the differences between ancient and modern democracies,[26] but it may risk overstating the practical differences in the role the people actually play in both historical contexts. For much of the difference turns upon the abstract concepts, such as representation and popular sovereignty, that modern political philosophy has introduced to political life. One of the distinct advantages of Aristotle's method is that he is able to more directly and empirically observe the disputes that arise between the few and the many.[27] Having said this, Aristotle does not deny the possibility of seeing the people as comprising the whole of the political community—but he does not assume or insist upon it either. In this, his treatment is in keeping with the language itself. As Josiah Ober points out, the term democracy (*dēmokratia*) is etymologically distinct from the other two standard Greek regimes: oligarchy (*oligarchia*) and monarchy (*monarcheia*).[28] The former describes the "rule of the few," and the latter "the rule of the one." But democracy does not correspondingly mean "rule of the many," despite being generally so understood. It rather means the "capacity" or "power" of the demos. In other words, the full scope of the people is left ambiguous, in a way that it is not for oligarchy or monarchy.

In this respect, classical democracies betray some of the same tension over the ultimate definition of the people as do modern ones. Leo Strauss describes that tension here as follows:

[26]Including, but not limited to, the massive presence of slavery in the ancient world, the heavily militarized citizenry, the absence of what we might call the racial component of social conflict, the far more condensed geographical ambit of ancient political communities, and so on—cf. Moses Finley, *Politics in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) with G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World from the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

[27]Needless to say, simple observation hardly exhausts the range of Aristotle's method, and he is far from a mere empiricist, though fully grasping his evaluative approach to political science would require a discussion of his understanding of teleology, which is beyond the scope of this article. For a more detailed account of Aristotle's political science, see chapters 1 and 2 of Stephen G. Salkever, *Finding the Mean: Theory and Practice in Aristotelian Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

[28]Josiah Ober, "The Original Meaning of 'Democracy': Capacity to Do Things, not Majority Rule," *Constellations* 15, no. 1 (2008): 3–9.

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> It could seem that democracy is not merely one form of the city among many but its normal form, or that the city tends to be democratic. . . . As city it is the people or belongs to the people and this would seem to require that it be ruled by the people. It is no accident that Aristotle introduces the fundamental reflections of the third book of the *Politics* by an argument of democratic origin and that the first definition of the citizen which suggests itself to him is that of the citizen in a democracy. In contradistinction to oligarchy and aristocracy, democracy is the rule of all and not the rule of a part. . . . Nevertheless, according to Aristotle, the apparent rule of all in democracy is in fact the rule of a part.[29]

This fundamental problem—the tension between democracy as the apparent rule of all and democracy as the rule of a part—is reproduced by modern populism within the context of popular sovereignty. For, strictly speaking, populism would seem to be a tautological concept: it is a political expression of the will of the people, who notionally constitute the entirety of the modern political community which is itself an expression of their will. Populism must, without denying the basic legitimacy of popular sovereignty, insist that some people are in fact the true people. Further, it must posit that there are certain individuals—elites—who are, despite their nominal membership in the constitutive body of the people, somehow apart from it as a political matter. They have arrogated to themselves an authority—be it political, economic, or cultural (or often some combination of those)—over and beyond that of their fellow citizens. And thus they are, for rhetorical purposes at least, to be deprived of their status as members of the people; they are in fact the ones against whom the people must combine and organize. The few have a curious dual character in this account; they are surely domestic agents, and yet they are treated partly as being foreign to the civic body.

This tension, in other words—between the people as the whole of the political community and the people as a faction of it—is not unique to either modern or classical milieus; it is rather a point of commonality between modern and ancient democracies. And that connection provides a useful starting point for reflecting on how Aristotle's treatment of democratic politics bears on what we now call populism.

Class Conflict in the Democratic Regime

What then is the problem with democracy, at least as far as contemporary populism is concerned? When we talk about populism today as a kind of problem, our greatest—if not always articulated—concern is that of factional conflict or what Aristotle calls *stasis*.[30] Sometimes this cashes out as a fear of

[29]Strauss, *City and Man*, 36. See relatedly Josiah Ober, *Demopolis: Democracy before Liberalism in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 45.

[30]Though concerns over *stasis* are hardly limited to Aristotle in the body of classical political thought; the classic evocation of *stasis* likely remains Thucydides 3.82–84.

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stasis simply for its own sake; other times as a fear of *stasis* that results in the erosion of our constitutional democracy and its replacement by despotic control.

Any discussion of how Aristotle treats expressions of "populism" as a democratic phenomenon needs to begin with his treatment of democracy proper. And here it must be noted that Aristotle does not consider democracies to be especially conflict prone. While Aristotle has acquired a reputation as an antidemocratic thinker, this hardly does justice to what he actually writes.[31] In fact, his statements about democracy, while frequently qualified, give credit to its solid virtues in surprising ways. These virtues are necessarily comparative (insofar as his discussions of democracy always take place within a kind of dialectic with other regimes), but they are best described in terms of a moderation that derives from aggregating the best parts of the city.

> The many, of whom none is individually an excellent man, nevertheless can when joined together be better—not as individuals but all together—than those [who are best], just as dinners contributed by many can be better than those equipped from a single expenditure. For because they are many, each can have a part of virtue and prudence, and on their joining together, the multitude, with its many feet and hands and having many senses, becomes like a single human being, and so also with respect to character and mind. Thus the many are also better judges of the works of music and of the poets; some [appreciate] a certain part, and all of them all the parts. (1281b2–3)[32]

Then there is his remarkable claim: "Many of those who want to set up aristocratic regimes as well [as polities] thoroughly err not only by the fact that they distribute more to the well off, but also by deceiving the people. For in time from things falsely good there must result a true evil, and the aggrandizements of the wealthy are more ruinous to the polity than those of the people" (4.12 1297a6).[33] As a general rule, the depredations of the few are a greater threat than the many to the city.[34]

[31]See, e.g., Ellen Meiksins Wood and Neal Wood, *Class Ideology and Ancient Political Theory: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in Social Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

[32]For more on this point, see Daniela Cammack, "Aristotle on the Virtue of the Multitude," *Political Theory* 41 (2013): 175–202. It should be noted that Aristotle will qualify this praise in passages that follow; his claim about the virtues of the multitude holds for some, but certainly not all, democracies. I thank Susan Collins for reminding me of this point.

[33]See also Aristotle's related claim that democracy seems to be on the whole more moderate and less prone to conflict than oligarchy (1302a15).

[34]The argument that the wealthy few are a greater threat than the many presages Machiavelli's discussions in chapter 9 of *The Prince* and *Discourses on Livy* 1.58 (though of course Aristotle does not take up Machiavelli's further line of argument: that the power of the people is not just less threatening to stability but, in their very numbers, potentially more threatening to other cities).

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Further, Aristotle does not equate democracy with "mob rule"; he certainly does not use such a term in any formal sense.[35] He does allow for, and describes at length, the many ways that democracy can become degraded or deformed, becoming the vehicle for the tyrannical exercise of power by the majority faction. But he does not employ a discrete terminology for the phenomenon of "bad" democracy. Ironically, this is not because he is an unequivocal supporter of democracy, but is rather due to his understanding that democracy is a fundamentally flawed regime (1279b5). Contrary to modern critics,[36] this does not indicate an antidemocratic prejudice per se—after all, Aristotle makes the same claim for oligarchy. Indeed, among the deviant regimes, oligarchy is generally worse than a comparatively moderate democracy (1298b2). In fact, he allows that the multitude can govern in superior ways, though in doing so it may lose its democratic designation—for Aristotle reserves the term *politeia* for such regimes (1279a3). And not for nothing is this superior form of "democracy" called *politeia*, which is to say it is the regime as such (1289b1). Though *politeia* is described as a mixture of oligarchy and democracy (1294a3), it merits its essential association with democracy for its potential to more fully represent the entirety of the city and not just one or more factions of it. It is—not unlike our modern claims for democracy—the truest version of a political regime. In other words, of the most common ancient regimes, democracy comes closest to representing the totality of the citizenry, as we presume it does today. But lacking a doctrine of popular sovereignty, ancient democracies did not share the presumption against the possibility of politicized class conflict.

As Bernard Yack argues:

> [Aristotle's] understanding of class antagonism is relevant only for individuals who live in political communities, and only for the citizens among that already small portion of the human species. It is primarily political friends who become class enemies in Aristotle's account. In other words, it is primarily those who have the mutual expectations characteristic of members of political communities who turn the division between rich and poor into the main source of their social conflict.[37]

In other words, the irruption of populism in modern democracies, insofar as it places the division between rich and poor at the center of social conflicts, constitutes a repoliticization of democratic communities. In contrast to both Weberian bureaucratic administration and the expansion of judicial rights, populism is a form of more or less direct political conflict.

[35]The literal term "ochlocracy" is largely postclassical, first appearing in the sixth book of Polybius's *Histories*.

[36]E.g., Barry S. Strauss, "On Aristotle's Critique of Athenian Democracy," in *Essays on the Foundations of Aristotelian Political Science*, ed. Carnes Lord and David K. O'Connor (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), 212–33.

[37]Bernard Yack, *The Problems of a Political Animal: Community, Justice, and Conflict in Aristotelian Political Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 210.

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Possibly owing to our experience of the ideological and ethnic civil wars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we may tend to think of the participants in factional conflict as having revolutionary goals of overturning the established regime and replacing it with something different.[38] While Aristotle allows that this can indeed be the case, it is not a necessary condition for *stasis*. "Sometimes [factional conflict] is not with a view to the established regime, and they intend that the system remain the same, but want to have it in their own hands . . . or where there is a democracy, to make it more democratically run or less, and similarly in the case of the remaining regimes, either to tighten or to loosen them" (1301b8–9). He does not then require a distinct terminology (as we seem to do) to describe the phenomenon of nonrevolutionary agonistic politics within the context of democratic regimes. Politics can be disputatious by nature, and these disputes can take many forms.

As for the causes of our political disputes, Aristotle describes the phenomenon of *stasis* as being the result of inequality (1301b26). As he notes:

> Goodness [*aretē*] . . . is a quality to which all men pretend; and everybody thinks himself capable of filling most offices. But the same people cannot be both rich and poor. This explains why these two classes, the rich and the poor, are regarded as parts of the city in a special sense. Nor is this all. Since one of these classes is generally small, and the other large, they appear to have the status of opposed elements among the parts of the city. (1291b5–10)

Importantly, however, he does not reduce political divisions to a matter of material causes alone. They derive their particular intensity not simply from disagreements over the proper allocations of the resources of the city, but from the problem of justice as it relates to those disagreements. As Aristotle notes, both democratic and oligarchic regimes (or factions) have a partial claim to justice—that is to say, their particular arrangement reflects a particular understanding of justice, albeit one that is also expedient. Hence its conception is never wholly just. Consequently, for Aristotle, *stasis* does not arise from the mere clash of interests, which are inherent in political life. *Stasis* instead arises when a certain group does not share in the regime's prevailing conception of justice (1301a38)—and further when their contributions to the good of the city are neglected or derided by the ruling part of the regime. Aristotle specifically makes the following claim about the demos:

> For having [those with neither a material stake in the city nor noteworthy virtue] take part in the greatest offices is not safe: through injustice and imprudence they would act unjustly in some respects and err in others. On the other hand, to give them no part and for them to have no part in the offices is a matter for alarm, for when there exist many who are deprived of prerogatives and poor, that city is necessarily filled with enemies. (1281b7)

[38]Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) provides a masterful overview.

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Class conflict breaks out as a result of the backlash of citizens who have made themselves enemies of the prevailing regime owing to a combination of material deprivation and a lack of access to political offices. Perhaps for this reason, one of the few hard rules he proposes for warding off domestic conflict across *all* regimes is to avoid disproportionately or unduly elevating certain citizens to positions of esteem (1308b12).[39]

In light of Aristotle's account of the causes of nonrevolutionary factional conflict in a democracy, it is necessary to examine just how he evaluatively views such conflict. The following passage is most salient and worth reproducing in full:

> Another kind of democracy is the same in other respects, but the multitude has authority and not the law. This comes about when decrees rather than law are authoritative, and this happens on account of the popular leaders. For in cities under a democracy that is based on law a popular leader does not arise, but the best of the citizens preside; but where the laws are without authority, there popular leaders arise. For the people become a monarch, from many combining into one—for the many have authority not as individuals but all together. . . . Such a people, being a sort of monarch, seek to rule monarchically on account of their not being ruled by law, and become like a master: flatterers are held in honor, and this sort of rule of the people bears comparison with tyranny among the forms of monarchy. (1292a25–27)

Aristotle actually goes so far as to suggest that under such conditions, the city can no longer be characterized as democratic, insofar as even a deviant regime such as democracy must still adhere to some form of lawful order, if it is to be considered a regime (1292a30–31). As the will of the multitude supplants the rule of law in this case, there is no longer sufficient order to describe this situation in constitutional terms (as democracy remains a kind of constitution of the city). This is the closest Aristotle comes to treating democratic defects as something qualitatively distinct from democracy itself, though again he does not attempt to label this phenomenon. And it is also the closest Aristotle comes to a classical treatment of how contemporary theorists like Mudde and Canovan describe populism: as a rule of the many acting against their chosen domestic enemies in a manner unconstrained by institutions or law.

It must be noted here, however, that the hazards of this defective version of democracy are not due to the possibility that it might decay into authoritarianism, as it frequently is for contemporary observers.[40] The tyrannical

[39]It is worth noting just how much of current demotic anger focuses not on the wealthy as such, but on those who hold highly visible positions of superiority in either the media or politics (or both).

[40]E.g., the many warnings concerning former US president Donald Trump's populist support primarily focused less on the threat posed by populists themselves and more on the authoritarian specter of Trump himself.

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qualities of lawless democracy—that is, democracy at its worst, as Aristotle depicts it—are fully manifested in the rule of the demos itself. And while he acknowledges that the people will, under these conditions, generate popular leaders (i.e., demagogues), these leaders ultimately play the role of flatters and courtiers; it is the people "combining into one" that plays the role of the tyrant. While he notes that demagogues can be a cause of conflict in democratic regimes (1304b20), the danger is less that demagogic leaders will prove to be tyrants-in-waiting than that they will egg on the most tyrannical impulses of the demos.[41] Aristotle likens such demagogues not to tyrants themselves but to the flatterers and sycophants who proliferate around tyrants, finding expedient possibilities in a tyrannical regime (1292a28). Thus, he neither lets even the most degraded democracies off the hook (by attributing their worst vices to ambitious demagogues) nor writes them off entirely (being still prepared to offer counsel by which they might better themselves).

Indeed, in his customary way, Aristotle will later acknowledge that this is the type of democracy "which is now most particularly held to be democracy" (1298b12). That is to say, while he advances his own doubts that such a regime merits the name "democracy," he allows that this is what his contemporaries largely consider a democracy. As such, it not only merits discussion in its own right, but (just as he will do for tyranny), he offers modest counsel for how such a regime might be improved and induce its citizens to rule more justly—namely, by utilizing a scheme of payments and other incentives to ensure that the widest possible distribution of citizens, both wealthy and poor, participates in the practices of ruling.

We may view populism as an imperfect form of democracy, yet for Aristotle democracy is already an imperfect regime, which tends to prioritize the good of the ruling demotic class over that of the political community itself—precisely the thing that populists are accused of. Aristotle does allow that there are essentially tyrannical forms of democracy (just as there can be essentially tyrannical forms of oligarchy), which represent a further degradation of that regime (1292a15, 1292b8), but these are presented more as a continuum rather than discrete entities.

While part of the danger of factional conflict is that it produces injustices, it is not sufficient to attribute populist or other malformations of democracy either to a lack of political commitment or to a lack of concern with questions of justice. Thus, we cannot simply say that the solution to the problems of democracy is even greater democracy—in the sense of greater civic engagement or more passionate concern for seeing justice done. For the problem of factional conflict is simply built into the structure of political community.

[41]The exception here seems to be those cases in which a single figure combines the qualities of a demagogue and a military leader (1305a7). Though Aristotle mentions several contemporary Hellenic cases, the archetypal example for our eyes probably remains Julius Caesar.

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If citizens are expected to engage in the practices of political life—not just voting, but also debating measures, setting policies, determining standards of material distribution—while at the same time reflecting on conceptions of justice that inform those practices, their disputes will inevitably take on a political form.[42] Factional conflict, or *stasis*, is very nearly a feature as much as a bug of political life. And populism is a kind of democratic factional conflict that is likely to remain a feature of our own political life.

Nonetheless, in light of Aristotle's analysis, our contemporary use of the term suggests a certain reticence about facing the limits or defects of democracy itself. "Populism" in this sense becomes a safe way to talk about those defects without risking the appearance of being undemocratic. Machiavelli tells of how the Roman writers would praise Caesar but blame Catiline as a safe way of criticizing the despotic tendencies of both figures;[43] something like this is at work among those today who praise democracy but blame populism. Viewed in this light, our use of the concept of populism becomes a way of scapegoating those elements of democracy that we recognize as flawed, while at the same time lacking the language that would allow us to discuss these flaws in democratic terms. And we require an alternate vocabulary in order to directly discuss the defects or limitations of democracy because of the ways that theorists today associate justice and political morality with democracy as such.[44]

This is not to say that resolving civil strife in a democracy requires abandoning claims of justice (as if that were possible). Rather, the Aristotelian account of democratic politics accepts that, in practice, the people will in most cases be a partial quantity, arrayed against the few. Moreover, while their particular claims may veer into injustice, that they make demotic and partial claims in the first place is not illegitimate, but is the logical extension of how appeals to justice are made in a democratic polity. Aristotle, after all, considers politics and the controversies politics generates to be wholly natural—indeed a fulfilment of our nature. Thus, the people's claim to rule—then or now—is, too, natural, even if it does not enjoy an exhaustive claim on justice. Indeed, to return to the central point, Aristotle's disinterested view of democracy allows him to evaluate its excessive tendencies without treating them as necessarily external to "true" democracy.

[42]Yack, *Problems of a Political Animal*. For an attempt to grapple with these problems in a modern context, see Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

[43]Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 1.10.

[44]See, e.g., Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996); John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971).

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Applying Aristotle's evaluative method in a nonreductive manner today would require us to come to a more precise understanding of our own regime. Though populist movements have been identified in countries as disparate as today's United States, Canada, France, the Philippines, Brazil, and Hungary (among others), these are of course widely different countries with different polities. We continue to use the language of "regimes," as Aristotle and his contemporaries spoke of *politeiai*, but our typologies are comparatively constricted, primarily involving democratic and autocratic (or, more loosely, authoritarian) regimes.[45] By contrast, Aristotle provides us with a larger and more diverse menagerie of political regimes—not just the standard sixfold typology of regimes announced at the outset of book 3, but, as one follows the movement of this argument throughout the third and fourth books of the *Politics*, ever more granular descriptions of regime subtypes. We find democracies that are more lawful, and those that are less lawful; democracies that incline more toward polity in their particular moderation (1297a8); mixed regimes that favor wealth, as Carthage does, and those that favor virtue, as Sparta does (1293b4); those that are more martial and include the citizenry in defense (1279b4); those that deliberate in separate groups (as in the regime of Telecles of Miletus) and those that deliberate altogether (1298a4–5); and, of course, there is his elaborate discussion of the "mixed regime" in book 4 (esp. 1295b34–1296a21).[46] In sum, the closer one gets to the real practice of politics, the more dizzyingly diverse real political life—including democratic political life—turns out to be.

Reading Aristotle in this way, we are encouraged to reflect more precisely upon the nature of our own regimes. At the same time, we are moved to seek to improve our (broadly democratic) political community in light of this understanding. If there is a takeaway here, it is that we should seek to ameliorate populist tendencies (as well as the oligarchic tendencies that operate in dialectic with them) with an eye to the specific character of our regime. Thus, we might ask ourselves: What kind of democracy are we? And how does a given populist movement improve or deform the character of that democracy?

All this said, Aristotle does not supply us with a simple formula or rule of thumb for determining which populist developments should in fact be characterized as reflecting democratic excesses, and which developments are simply called populist owing to latent oligarchic prejudices. As always, these must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis according to prudential judgment (1253a16, 1286a7). What Aristotle does supply us with, however, is a

[45]Consider how it is common today to refer to "oligarchs," but far less common to refer to "oligarchies."

[46]For a particularly thoughtful consideration of the similarities and differences across the regimes Aristotle discusses, see Ryan K. Balot, "The 'Mixed Regime' in Aristotle's *Politics*," in *Aristotle's "Politics": A Critical Guide*, ed. Thornton Lockwood and Thanassis Samaras (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 103–22.

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fuller understanding of the nature of democratic regimes that might be used to hone those same judgments when it comes to such cases.

Conclusion

It may seem strange to seek to draw conclusions about populism from a thinker who never actually employs the term or its cognates. But one of the contentions of this article is that it is precisely Aristotle's very distance from contemporary debates that makes his reflections useful. And much the same is true for his distance from democracy itself.

Practically speaking, this means that he approaches democracy as one of many possible regime types, rather than as the only possible basis for legitimate government. Unlike virtually all contemporary thinkers, he is not himself a committed democrat. His is thus a more disinterested standpoint from which to evaluate democracy's relative strengths and weaknesses. Democracy as Aristotle understands it is not something intrinsically good or bad, but what Stephen Salkever calls "morally indefinite."[47] Consequently, Aristotle is not obliged to attribute democratic defects to an independent phenomenon such as populism. Instead, he diagnoses how the practices of democratic regimes can veer into excess in ways that are both characteristic of but ultimately harmful to those regimes. Conversely, he also identifies those oligarchic or elite impulses that lead to fear of the demotic energies that we now call populism.

As was said at the outset, the fundamental claims of democratic popular sovereignty produce a recurring tendency to dispute the character and makeup of the people, which in practice mostly takes the form of factional conflict. The dangers of factional conflict under contemporary conditions, however, are obscured by our demotic prejudices. Populists after all claim to represent the people—which is everybody under our prevailing definition. Thus, contemporary theorists, while recognizing the emergence of something like class conflict through the rhetoric of the many versus the few, are unable to adequately describe or evaluate it because of the way we collectively understand democracy as a function of popular sovereignty. The populist claim to represent the "true" people may prove false or dangerous, but it is fundamentally the same claim that our ordinary democratic institutions make.

Ultimately, we cannot determine *ab initio* whether the claims of a given populist movement are excessive in the absence of some established agreement about the appropriate bounds of justice within the context of the regime itself. Aristotle's sober judgment is that disputes over justice are simply a core part of political life—albeit a potentially dangerous one—and that the

[47]Salkever, *Finding the Mean*, 208. This is not to say that Aristotle's account is value neutral—only that he does not necessarily locate value in democracy itself.

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problem with advancing claims of justice is not that they are necessarily wrong or illegitimate on their face, but that they are almost always partial and incomplete. To paraphrase James Madison's famous analogy of faction and liberty to fire and oxygen,[48] Aristotle nowhere proposes that political communities simply abandon a concern with justice in order to preserve political stability. Not until Thomas Hobbes would this line of thinking begin to bear fruit.

From an Aristotelian standpoint, populist passions could well be a symptom of democratic sickness—though whether the sickness is best understood as a majority faction that has grown tyrannical or as a feverish response to the excessive authority of an elite faction would require a case-specific analysis. This may require a richer taxonomy of democratic regimes than we presently have—a worthy task for political theorists. Meanwhile, the democratic energies that we now routinely call populist are surely here to stay. But, as this reading of Aristotle suggests, perhaps the term itself obscures more than it reveals, especially if it remains a substitute for a deeper inquiry into the particular nature of our own liberal democratic regime.

[48]James Madison, *Federalist* no. 10, in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: New American Library, 1961), 46.

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