
Review articles

Torcuato S. Di Tella: Explorations in Populism

Ghița Ionescu and Ernest Gellner (eds): *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*, London, 1969.

The enlightened nationalism of early postwar Asia and Africa has gone astray. At its best, it was represented by Nehru, a civilized quasi-socialist aristocrat leading the masses to a better life under the aegis of parliamentary government. This image was too good to be true. After a couple of decades, that generation has either gone to the right or been replaced by various sorts of demagogues, communalists, and military rulers. One could have forecast this, since it had been happening in Latin America for the last century and a half, under similar conditions.

Our standard social science, which particularly in its more popularized versions can be reduced to a combination of Marxism and evolutionism, is not very well prepared to understand this phenomenon. Evolutionists – which in spite of disclaimers most social scientists are – would have expected a gradual increment of well being, basic freedoms, and popular participation, with a progressive shifting to the left of the political spectrum. Marxists read the future in terms of a deepening of the class struggle in the new nations which, in contrast to the West, did not have other colonies to feed upon. But what if the masses did indeed engage in the class struggle, but in alliance with the most unexpected partners and with a shocking lack of clear ideologies or grass roots organization? The surprising thing was that these alliances could often muster a lot of strength, based on their capacity to put the people in the street, thus menacing their rivals, while at the same time keeping the use of violence under their control. The possible combinations are almost infinite, and there is a tendency in the literature to use the general term of populism to cover most of them, because of their general reliance on the mobilization of the *people*, as distinct from a well organized and class conscious working class or peasantry. Probably because the extreme prevalence of this kind of political movements was not expected, they have been branded with a catch-all name which needs clarification. The volume edited by Ionescu and Gellner is a welcome contribution to this field.

Populism is widespread when the Tocquevillean 'intermediate associations' are weak or nonexistent. Populism provides, then, a *short cut* to social change, replacing the very complex and difficult process of mass organization by more primitive alternatives. Instead of an ideology, the

personality cult and charisma; instead of grass roots leadership and financial contributions, a superimposed structure of military men and wealthy financiers, the origin of whose money is not always clear.

It so happens that there are two main previous historical experiences which also go by the name of populism: American farmers' protest movements and the Russian *Narodniki* with their descendants the socialist revolutionaries. Both these cases are quite different from the more recent populism of the Third World, mostly because they never quite crystallized into a solid alliance of mobilized masses and anti-status-quo elites. Hofstadter, in his contribution on the North American experience, does point out that apart from farmers the movement occasionally included significant representatives of the 'new men' who established themselves as business entrepreneurs in the frontier areas. But the alliance with the urban working class was never firmly undertaken, probably *because* of the lack of important non-farm or non-miner groups in the movement, which could have given it less rigidity and more communication channels to reach a national audience.

As for the Russian *Narodniki*, they were an urban-based intellectual group, concerned with devising a transition from pre-capitalist to socialist society, and they never developed a very solid base among the mass of the population. When their inheritors, the socialist revolutionaries, were about to do so, the bolsheviks snatched it away from them. Walicki, in his chapter on this subject, points out, following Lenin, that the ideology of the *Narodniki* corresponded to a reaction of the small producers of the artisan and small peasant economy who could be ruined by a sudden introduction of unbridled capitalism. But, as Walicki makes clear, there was not much connection between the makers of the ideology and the people for whom it was consciously or unconsciously devised.

Surprisingly enough, in view of the fact that very few people learn from history, more recent populisms have learnt their lesson, and have provided the emotional, economic and violent condiments needed to make their brew acceptable. The Balkan experience between the two wars was a transition in this sense, as can be seen from Ionescu's chapter. Populism became *actually* (not just theoretically, as in Russia) allied with the peasants, but it failed to make up its mind whether to choose the middle class or the working class to complete its political formula. Finally, it collapsed in its fight against monarchical and fascist reaction, the latter ominously using, to some extent, populist recipes.

In order to understand the nature of present day populism it is surely essential to study the social structure of the countries where it spreads, particularly their class structure. This is done by several contributors to

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the volume, in what becomes a main theme: the impact of early capitalist development on the pre-industrial artisan and peasant economy. In a sense, it is the concrete realization of what had just been adumbrated by Lenin for the Russian form. Stewart points to the fact that populism is a reaction to a *peripheral* situation (no populism in Great Britain, not even much of it in France or Germany, or in the Eastern United States), and, in those places, more particularly a reaction to industrialization. Worsley adds dramatically that it is a reaction to 'the spectre of class differentiation in the countryside'. A close look at 'rich', 'middle' and 'poor' peasants or artisans is necessary, as well as a realization that capitalist development, far from simply increasing the number of the middle classes, might in many instances decrease the well being or the number of the traditional middle sectors.

This point of view is also taken up by Saul in his description of the situation in Africa, where he sees populism as a reaction of rural small people confronted by the capitalist relations imposed upon them. What is important is that those 'capitalist relations' imposed on small people may often involve a reduction of their traditional absolute or relative social status. As a matter of fact, the impact may be felt also by middle and upper strata, thus creating a whole fauna of status incongruent groups ready to thrust themselves onto the political scene to get even with society. Looking at things from this point of view, what is surprising in the Third World countries is that they do not suffer from even more violence and instability than they are showing now. Probably the trend will be towards an increase in these characteristics, till the first impact of the establishment of capitalist relations has spent itself, allowing the more well known effects of modern capitalism and industrialism to operate.

Here it becomes important to differentiate between rural and urban aspects of the social structure. Most authors in this volume consider populism a rural phenomenon, because they generally have Asian and African cases in mind, while North American and Russian populisms were also rural or rural-oriented. But the Latin American scene, described by Hennessey, provides a case where most populist movements are urban rather than rural based. Urban populism, encompassing both the industrial working class and the semi lumpen sectors of shanty town dwellers, pedlars and other unemployed or semi-employed, is rougher and apparently more 'manipulative' than the rural variety. But we should take into account that as it is much more difficult to control urban and literate masses, the manipulative elements are simply more in evidence to the external observer in this case, but there is no lack of them in the rural varieties. Nevertheless, Hennessey pins his hopes on the development of a

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non-manipulative populism with rural bases and leadership of the Catholic left type, or on more 'regenerative' upheavals of the Mexican, Bolivian or Cuban varieties.

An analysis of the ideological components of populism is less fruitful, by comparison with the study of its anchorage in the social structure, or its internal organization. MacRae concentrates on the primitivist aspects of the populist ideology, an orgy of fraternity, anti-elitism and apocalyptic hopes. He makes it clear that he does not like the thing, as probably he does not like the primitivist elements (of another type) to be seen in conservative ideology. But if one has to live with populism it is important to see how some of the more menacing aspects of its ideology can be tamed, as has been the case with European conservatism. If this is to be done, it is important to separate out the various items in the ideology, avoiding too dark a picture, or a general lumping of diverse components. Wiles comes nearer to this, and it is significant that he sees a lot of populist components in the ideology and tradition of such a civilized body as the Labour Party. Worsley goes a bit further in a gallant effort to rescue the universality of the value of 'participation', as a main tenet of populism and distinct from respect for minorities or orderly change of government (the creed of liberalism). A good society would have all of these, but it is at least doubtful whether populism can be held responsible for bringing in the dimension of popular participation. This differs from case to case, and often the 'participation' brought about by populism is really illusory (apart from being allied with authoritarianism, which admittedly is a different dimension), especially in the rural versions. Urban populism, on the other hand, must rely on a greater amount of participation by the people, and to this extent it may be a forerunner of an autonomous Labour movement.

This leads us to the problem of organization, a very promising but more difficult line of enquiry, which is not sufficiently covered in this volume. Minogue does refer to this, however, contrasting the characteristics of 'movements' with those of 'associations', the latter being based on more individualistic personalities and a clear cut give and take, almost business like, while the former rely on looser bonds of loyalty.

After reading this book, I am left with the impression that there are two main lines for the further study of populism. The more important one is the analysis of its organization: how do the members come together, how do they raise the money, to what extent do they approach or fall short of the Tocquevillean ideal of an intermediary association? This needs a lot of field work or close interpretation of documentary evidence. The other line, easier to pursue, is the study of the social composition of the populist

THE ETHIOPIAN WAR, 1935-1941

Angelo Del Boca

Translated by P. D. Cummins

This is the first full-scale history of the Ethiopian war and the Italian dream of empire that ended abruptly in 1941. Drawing on a wealth of source material, including eyewitness accounts, the author also examined the battlefields in Ethiopia itself, familiarizing himself with the country and its people. In addition, he interviewed dozens of key figures from both sides, ranging from Haile Selassie and Ras Imru to Generals Faldella and Armellini.

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movement, in terms of class and other identifications, and the empirical connection between the strength of populism and types of social stratification in the country or region.

Michael Evans: The Work and the Framework

G. Lichtheim: *The Origins of Socialism*, London, 1969.

Mr Lichtheim is a scholar who has made an outstanding contribution to the understanding of Marxism: indeed his book *Marxism* (1961) is probably one of the best single pieces of work on the subject to be published in the last twenty years. His views are based upon a profound knowledge of his subject, and are therefore formidable even when most controversial. The purpose of his latest book, he tells us, is 'to clarify the origins of socialism, both as a world-view and as the specific response of workers and intellectuals to the two-fold upheaval of the French Revolution and the industrial revolution' (p. vii). In fact, Marxism bulks very large indeed for a book on socialism covering the period from 1789 to 1848 and it is perhaps in belated recognition of this fact that Lichtheim re-states his aim in the conclusion as an attempt 'to review the circumstances under which socialism in general, and Marxism in particular, took shape' (p. 215). It is Lichtheim's final intention to provide an analytical history of the socialist movement 'from its beginnings to the present time'.

As Lichtheim rightly stresses, the invention of a new concept such as 'socialism' signifies a new way of looking at the world; and, moreover, an invention which takes place within (and helps both to condition and interpret) a particular historical situation. The French Revolution saw the beginnings of political democracy, yet it also instituted an individualist social order with an accent on private property rights and upon a creed of economic liberalism. Set against this trend were the socialist sects, who differed radically on many issues but agreed on one essential: the exclusion of any kind of society which entailed 'the uncontrolled ownership of the new means of production by a class of wealthy proprietors' (p. 5). We are told that from the beginning, with some unfortunate lapses, the socialist movement combined the critique of liberalism with the commitment of the Enlightenment to personal liberty and rationality. But the early