

Understanding the People: Conceptual Reflections for Studying the Origins of Modern Populism

In the current debate, populism has become an all-encompassing concept, capable of bringing together under the same label a multitude of political currents that have little in common. Populism is frequently used to refer to any socio-political phenomenon that claims the power of the people without being part of the framework of liberal democracy, which is a gross simplification.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, populism can be defined as “political ideas and activities that are intended to get the support of ordinary people by giving them what they want.”¹ Quite often, the term has a negative connotation and is used to discredit the adversaries of the established political order. Such an approach seems logical given that politics is a highly contested field, but it does not help much to understand a problem that can hardly be classified according to the good/bad pattern.

At a conference held in 1967 at the London School of Economics, a broad group of academic experts attempted to outline a possible definition of populism. Although the debate participants, including the philosopher Isaiah Berlin, historians Richard Hofstadter, Franco Venturi and Andrzej Walicki, as well as the sociologist Alain Touraine, did not come to a single conclusion, the conference brought out a multitude of perspectives on the controversial concept. In the book summarizing the results of the debate, populism was defined as an ideology, a political movement, a response to the “crises of development” and even a political syndrome. Moreover, the contributors to the instructive volume, co-edited by Ernest Gellner and Ghiță Ionescu stressed the numerous differences that the phenomena subsumed under the concept of populism had historically demonstrated in the Russian Empire, Eastern Europe, the United States and Latin America.²

On the other hand, different varieties of populism also have some common features. Simplifying it a bit, one could say that the lowest common denominator of populist

¹ “Populism,” in *Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/populism>.

² See Ghiță Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, eds., *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969).

movements is their emphasis on the importance of the people as the main source of political legitimacy. Knowing what the “people” exactly is, of course, anything but easy. According to the British political scientist Margaret Canovan, the concept of the people, understood as a group with common interests that can be mobilized to achieve political objectives, is unmistakably related to the Roman (republican and imperial) heritage. However, the “people” such as it is understood today was reinvented in modern Europe as a result of philosophical battles and social conflicts around sovereignty, that is, the origin of political power.³

In this context, the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) on popular sovereignty acquired great prominence. In the wake of the French Revolution, this principle became, in nineteenth-century Europe, perhaps the most influential proposal for how the social contract should work.⁴ In a world where traditional authorities and hierarchies such as the Church, the monarchy and the nobility, but also the customs of the rural world, were being called into question, the “people” as a source of legitimacy – and therefore power – took on unprecedented importance.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the dynamics of political power of the “people” took different paths. The success of the American Revolution meant the establishment of a republican government that proclaimed itself popular. However, the first decades of the existence of the United States were marked by a conflict between the supporters and opponents of majority rule.⁵

Among the authors of the American Constitution, Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) was a leading proponent of the political power of the common people as the foundation of the Republic. A generation later, President Andrew Jackson (1767-1845) took up, at least rhetorically, the cause of the middle- and lower-class producers against the interests of the rich and privileged. From his perspective, it was a matter of returning to the

³ Margaret Canovan, *The People* (Cambridge: Polity Press), 10-39.

⁴ See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du Contrat social, ou Principes du droit politique*, in *Collection complète des œuvres* (Geneva: Peyrou-Moultou, 1780-1789), I: 187-360, <https://www.rousseauonline.ch/pdf/rousseauonline-0004.pdf>.

⁵ On the construction of populist tradition in the United States, see Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 9-25. Kazin defines populism, too narrowly, as a style of political rhetoric. Still, his analysis of the phenomenon in the American context remains one of the best.

“American people” that power and influence that the Founding Fathers of the United States had achieved in their struggle against the British monarchy. On the eve of the Civil War, American democracy produced in Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) another exceptional political figure who positioned himself as a man of the people. This time, the “American people” were to transcend racial boundaries. More important still, however, was Lincoln’s insistence that national unity and democratic government, “of the people, by the people, and for the people,” were two sides of the same coin.

Meanwhile, on the European continent, the conflict over political power and popular sovereignty took a very different direction. The dramatic events of the French Revolution disrupted the social order in a profound and lasting way. Napoleon’s defeat in 1815 seemed to pave the way for the re-establishment of traditional hierarchies. However, a quarter of a century of revolutionary upheaval made a complete return to the institutions of the Ancien Régime impossible and forced European monarchs to seek viable agreements with various social groups.

The constitutions introduced in many European monarchies at that time ensured parliamentary representation for the wealthy and educated classes, but failed to resolve conflicts between the old and new influential groups. Moreover, the constitutional arrangements of the post-Napoleonic Restoration (1815-1848) excluded the common people, consisting primarily of peasants but also of small artisans and urban workers, from the political process. The situation was made even more complex by the fact that the subjects of the restored monarchs often belonged to several linguistic groups and cultural traditions. Such a situation, not at all unusual for the estate societies of the Ancien Régime, was highly problematic after the Napoleonic Wars, which shook the foundations of the tacit social contract based on traditional religious, feudal and kinship loyalties.

The Battle of the Nations in October 1813 was clear evidence that times had changed. The armed confrontation at the gates of Leipzig involved more than half a million combatants from numerous European countries and demonstrated with great clarity that the mobilization of the national sentiment of the popular masses had become an indispensable factor for military success. In September 1792, this sentiment – then called “patriotic” – had sealed the victory of the French revolutionary army over the Prussians at Valmy. Twenty-one years later, the ability to harness national sentiment – that is,

patriotism of the opposite kind – helped the Russian, Prussian and Austrian armies defeat the French and their allies at Leipzig.⁶

At the Congress of Vienna in 1814 and 1815, the victorious powers agreed on a European concert that did not take into account the national-democratic aspirations of the middle and working classes, who had participated in the struggle against the French Empire, among other things, because they hoped to gain the right to participate more directly in the political process. Given the refusal of the ruling classes to share their power, many former combatants turned to organizing anti-government activities. The Carbonari in Italy, the student associations in Germany, the radical republicans in Bourbon France: all of them were opposed to the order of the post-Napoleonic Restoration, whose pronounced elitist, anti-popular and anti-national character seemed to go against the march of history.⁷

For the nineteenth-century progressives, these conflicts were much more than vague memories of a distant past. The motto “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,” which in the 1820s began to be seen as the most genuine expression of the French Revolution, was for them the foundation of their own program of radical transformation. The emergence of numerous socialist and nationalist currents throughout the nineteenth century demonstrates the importance that questions of popular sovereignty acquired in the public

⁶ The Battle of the Nations and the Cannonade of Valmy were later used to construct national myths. Thus, the German nationalist historian Ernst Moritz Arndt (1769-1860) claimed that the victory at Leipzig “saved our land and our people from the abominable yoke of French tyranny”, creating the conditions for the Germans to “become a whole people again”. See his *Ein Wort über die Feier der Leipziger Schlacht* (Frankfurt am Main: P. W. Eichenberg, 1814), 4, http://books.google.de/books?id=LzoAAAAAcAAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=de&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false. On the historiographical reconstruction and historical memory of the two battles, see Jürgen Knaack, “Wie die Völkerschlacht bei Leipzig 1813 zu ihrem Namen kam”, in *Achim von Arnim und sein Kreis*, ed. Steffen Dietzsch & Ariane Ludwig (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 269-278; Roger Dufraisse, “Valmy: Une victoire, une légende, une énigme”, *Francia* 17, no. 2 (1990): 95-118.

⁷ About the anti-monarchic movements during the post-Napoleonic Restoration, see Louis Bergeron et al., *La época de las revoluciones europeas, 1780-1848* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1989), 205-216 y 251-282; Wolfgang Hardtwig, *Vormärz: Der monarchische Staat und das Bürgertum* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1985). For a comparative view of the political role of the middle classes in nineteenth-century Europe, see Josep Maria Fradera & Jesús Millán, eds., *Las burguesías europeas de siglo XIX: Sociedad civil, política y cultura* (Valencia & Madrid: Universitat de València & Biblioteca Nueva, 2000) and Pamela M. Pilbeam, *The Middle Classes in Europe, 1789-1914: France, Germany, Italy and Russia* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 235-293.

sphere at that time.⁸ These dynamics were felt not only in the western part of Europe, but also in the southern and eastern periphery. The Russian case is particularly interesting in this context.

The dramatic experiences of the Napoleonic invasion of 1812 and the Decembrist Rebellion of 1825 prompted many members of the educated public to question the possibilities and limits of their country (which ultimately meant asking themselves about the possibilities and limits of their personal success). On the one hand, the victory over Napoleon's troops with the triumphant entry into Paris in March 1814 provided unequivocal proof of the strength of Russia and its army, which consisted of both nobles and common people. On the other hand, extreme social inequality and the poor prospects for changing the situation within the country in the short term raised countless questions about the cost and sustainability of the then model of national development.

Given the repressive political climate of those years, members of the educated public could hardly openly discuss government affairs. Therefore, the debate took place covertly in literary, philosophical, and historiographical works. One of the most discussed ideas of that period was the concept of nationality (*narodnost'* in Russian), which also appeared as an element of Uvarov's conservative triad.⁹ Given the semantic ambiguity of the word *narod*, which can denote both the people and the nation, the term *narodnost'* could be used to refer to the national character (the nationalist dimension), the political nation (the representative dimension) and the common people (the social-revolutionary

⁸ See Gian Mario Bravo, *Historia del socialismo 1789-1848: El pensamiento socialista antes de Marx*, trad. Esther Benítez (Barcelona: Ariel, 1976) y Jacques Droz, ed., *Historia general del socialismo* (Barcelona: Destino, 1984), vol. I. On the connections between revolutions and nationalism, see Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (New York: Verso, 1991) and Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983). A revealing look at the cross-border collaboration of nineteenth-century nationalists is offered by Enric Ucelay-Da Cal, "Cómo surgieron las internacionales de nacionalistas: La coincidencia de iniciativas sociales muy diversas, 1864-1914", in *Patrias diversas, ¿misma lucha? Alianzas transnacionalistas en el mundo de entreguerras (1912-1939)*, ed. Enric Ucelay-Da Cal, Xosé M. Núñez Seixas, Arnau González i Vilalta (Barcelona: Edicions Bellaterra, 2020), 25-66.

⁹ The origins of the debate over *narodnost'* date back to the 1820s, when the concept appeared in literary debates. See Gennadi Kneper, "Reconstructing History: Pushkin, *Poltava*, and Imperial Nation-Building," *Russian Review* 79, no. 4 (October 2020): 623-638; in particular, 629-634.

dimension).¹⁰ Later, these meanings would be widely used in Russian political and philosophical debate, indicating the conservative, liberal and progressive stance on this issue. However, by the 1830s the prevailing interpretation focused on the nationalist dimension.

In the face of the challenge of liberal nationalism, closely linked to the ideas of revolution and popular sovereignty, Nicholas I and his advisors put forward the idea of monarchical nationalism. Within this framework, the ruling dynasty attempted to establish a connection with the peoples of the empire, and first and foremost with the Russian people, to whom it attributed qualities such as deep religiosity, loyalty to the emperor and a patriarchal sense of community. The Russian monarchy strove to create an elaborate symbolic language to underline its national character and to signal to society that it understood the needs of its subjects better than anyone else.¹¹ Cultural policy thus became one of the most important tools for achieving political ends.

The opera *A Life for the Tsar* (1836) by Mikhail Glinka (1804-57), in which a peasant loyal to the monarchy sacrificed himself to save the founder of the Romanov dynasty from Polish invaders in the early seventeenth century, was one of the best-known cultural manifestations of the Doctrine of Official Nationality. The construction of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, begun in 1838, was another example of this cultural policy. In this case, the work was intended to commemorate the victory over Napoleon as a result of the common effort of the Russian people gathered around the monarchy, and, furthermore, to strengthen the bond between the imperial state and the Orthodox Church.¹² Finally, this period also saw the establishment of numerous university chairs devoted to Russian history and national literature. The cautious educational expansion,

¹⁰ See A. I. Miller, "Triada grafa Uvarova" (presentation given as part of the public lectures series organized by Polit.ru, Moscow, 5 March 2007), <http://polit.ru/article/2007/04/11/uvarov>; and M. M. Shevchenko, *Konets odnogo Velichii: Vlast', obrazovanie i pechatnoe slovo v Imperatorskoi Rossii na poroge Osvoboditel'nykh reform* (Moskva: Tri kvadrata, 2003), 57-89.

¹¹ Richard S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*, vol. I, *From Peter the Great to the Death of Nicholas I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 255-295.

¹² See Thomas P. Hodge, "Susanin, Two Glinkas and Ryleev: History-Making in *A Life for the Tsar*," in *Intersections and Transpositions: Russian Music, Literature, and Society*, ed. Andrew B. Wachtel (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 3-19; M. S. Mostovskii, *Istoricheskoe opisaniie khrama vo imia Khrista Spasitelia v Moskve* (Moscow: Tipografiia S. Orlova, 1883) and E. N. Maleeva, "Obraz khrama kak obraz vlasti: Gosudarstvennyi zakaz v russkoi khudozhestvennoi kul'ture XIX veka", *Izvestiia Russkogo gosudarstvennogo pedagogicheskogo universiteta im. A. I. Gertsena*, no. 61 (2008): 165-169.

promoted by Uvarov with the support of Nicholas I, had the dual objective of consolidating the nationalist monarchical discourse and reinforcing the conservative intellectual circles, dominated by the nobility, with members of the middle class.

Compared to the mobilization tactics of American President Andrew Jackson (1767-1845), whom many historians regard as a precursor of contemporary populism, the instruments used by the Tsarist government may seem outdated.¹³ Indeed, Jackson's noisy election campaigns, media manipulation, and inclusion of ordinary people in the political narrative resemble the *modus operandi* of contemporary populism much more than the resources used by his Russian contemporaries. This, however, should not obscure the view of a shared characteristic: in both cases the ruling elites strove to create a direct link between the "people" and the supreme power – presidential in the United States, autocratic in the Russian Empire.

In many ways, both Jacksonian proto-populism and Nicholas I's monarchical nationalism can be seen as strategies of political adaptation to the social reality of the first decades of the nineteenth century. Given the experiences of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Empire with their modernizing drive and plebiscites, governments in the 1830s had to find a way to integrate broad layers of the underprivileged population into the political process. In a sense, Jacksonian democracy in the United States and the Doctrine of Official Nationality in Russia were distant cousins of French Bonapartism, which was later joined by the German notion of the *Volkskaisertum*, that is, the people's empire.¹⁴

¹³ See Jon Meacham, *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2008); Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006) and the three volumes of Robert V. Remini's biography, *Andrew Jackson* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

¹⁴ See Peter R. Baehr & Melvin Richter, eds., *Dictatorship in History and Theory: Bonapartism, Caesarism, and Totalitarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Frédéric Bluche, *Le bonapartisme: Aux origines de la droite autoritaire (1800-1850)* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 1980) and Karl Hammer & Peter Claus Hartmann, eds., *Der Bonapartismus: Historisches Phänomen und politischer Mythos. 13. deutsch-französisches Historikerkolloquium des Deutschen Historischen Instituts Paris in Augsburg vom 26. bis 30. September 1975* (Munich & Zurich: Artemis, 1977), <http://daten.digital-sammlungen.de/~db/0002/bsb00026317/images/index.html?id=00026317&nativo=V>.