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THE POPULIST THREAT TO LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

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Abstract

Populism is no longer considered a disease of the developing world. In recent decades it has spread throughout Europe and North America, while maintaining its grip in its historical stronghold, Latin America. It now represents the biggest threat to the survival of liberal democracy. Unlike communism, which attacked liberal democracy frontally and sometimes violently, populism works from within, neutralizing institutional and cultural antibodies. If not stopped, it naturally evolves towards authoritarianism. With different strategies and at different speeds, communism and populism achieve the same goal: the destruction of liberal democracy.

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The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy

Emilio Ocampo*

Of those men who have overturned the liberties of republics, the greatest number have begun their career by paying an obsequious court to the people; commencing demagogues, and ending tyrants.

Alexander Hamilton, The Federalist Papers

The tyranny of the majority is now generally included among the evils against which society requires to be on its guard.

John Stuart Mill, On Liberty

Almost two decades ago political scientist Margaret Canovan noted that very few of her colleagues in academia paid attention to populism, because they considered it a “pathological symptom of some social disease” characteristic of less developed countries or a political phenomenon that eluded a precise definition.¹ Not anymore. After being dormant for almost a century, populism has resurfaced in Europe and North America. Europe’s populist parties have tripled their vote in the past two decades and were able to put their leaders into government posts in eleven countries, which has increased thirteen fold the population living under populist regimes.² The populist virus has even infected the supposedly immune Anglo-Saxon countries. This new strain of populism is different from the one that prevailed in Latin America for most of the postwar era. Instead of fostering class conflict, it appeals to racism, xenophobia and anti-globalization. In this regard, it has a closer resemblance to early 20th century European populist strains.

¹ Canovan (2004).

² Lewis et al (2018).

Despite increased attention by academics, consensus over a definition of populism remains elusive.³ Even politicians are confused about its meaning. During a press conference at a NAFTA summit in mid-2016, Mexico's President Enrique Peña Nieto criticized politicians who "using populism and demagoguery, they choose the easiest way to solve the challenges of today's world. And things are not that simplistic." His comment was aimed at the yet to be nominated Republican presidential candidate whose poisonous rhetoric had Mexico and her citizens as favorite targets. To the surprise of Peña Nieto, President Obama rebuked him. "I'm not prepared to concede the notion that some of the rhetoric that's been popping up is populist," he said. In Obama's view, a populist politician was one who cared about "social justice issues or making sure that poor kids are getting a decent shot at life or have healthcare." Trump was a xenophobic chauvinist not a "true populist." Obama claimed the label for himself and Bernie Sanders.⁴

Peña Nieto was closer to the truth. Populism is not about "social justice", caring for the underprivileged or embracing "popular causes." What distinguishes populism is its contempt for the status quo, the antagonistic and Manichean relationship it proposes between "the people" (who vote for it) and "others" (who are their enemy), the weakening of democracy's institutional fabric and the degradation of its civic culture.

Populism is not, and cannot be equated with, a specific ideology but instead, as Ernesto Laclau always emphasized, it is "a way of doing politics." There is left-wing populism (e.g., Chavismo), right-wing populism (e.g., Fascism) and chameleonic populism (e.g., early Peronism).⁵ The first promotes class conflict, the second, xenophobia (and sometimes racism) and the third alternates opportunistically between both. All three variants breed fanaticism and resentment towards "others." The former is a key ingredient for its electoral success whereas the identification of the latter determines its ideological bias.

Although sometimes used as synonyms, populism and demagoguery have different meanings. Aristotle defined "demagoguery" as a degeneration of democracy. "Most of the ancient tyrants were

³ Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017).

⁴ "Read the Remarks From the 'Three Amigos' Summit Press Conference", *Time*, June 29, 2016.

⁵ As will be shown below, early Fascism was different to Nazism in many important ways. Among them the absence of racial superiority as one of its main tenets. Mussolini had two Jewish Finance Ministers and several advisors who were Jewish. Only after 1938, and under pressure from Hitler, he passed anti-semitic laws.

originally demagogues,” wrote the Stagirite sage. “The demagogues make the decrees of the people override the laws.”⁶ Centuries later, Polybius proposed the term “ochlocracy” to describe a government of the masses that under the leadership of a corrupt and opportunistic leader destroys “the virtues of democracy.”⁷ The term “ochlocracy” resurfaced in Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Social Contract* as the degeneration of democracy, which he defined as the government of the majority (which he considered utopian).⁸ Sir James Mackintosh defined ochlocracy as “the despotism of the rabble, not the dominion of the people... a degenerate democracy... a febrile paroxysm of the social body, which must speedily terminate in convalescence or dissolution.”⁹ Paradoxically, although pure democracy remains an ideal, its degenerated forms are quite prevalent.

Whatever its ideology, populism is an electoral scam. As Arrow, Riker and others have demonstrated, no electoral system can faithfully express the “will of the people.” Therefore no politician can claim to represent it either no matter what percentage of votes he or she obtained.¹⁰

Despite its ancient lineage, populism is essentially 20th century phenomenon.¹¹ The first self-titled populist party –the People’s Party– was founded in the United States in 1891 but despite having strong following in the Southern and Western States it disappeared after two decades.¹² In the 1920s and 1930s right-wing populism emerged in Europe’s fledgling parliamentary democracies. In Italy Mussolini led the way with his “March on Rome.”¹³ In Germany, Hitler tried to emulate him with the Munich *putsch* but failed and ended up in jail. While in prison he studied Gustave Le Bon’s lesson on mass psychology and once he regained his freedom he became “a demagogue of the first water and an orator and agitator of real ability.”¹⁴

In the 1930s populism also surfaced in several Latin American countries, always adapted to local culture and political circumstances. Mexico’s Lázaro Cárdenas inaugurated the region’s long

⁶ Aristotle [1919], p.157.

⁷ Polybius (1889), Vol.I, p.466.

⁸ Rousseau (1762), p. 58. See also Riker (1982), pp.13-14.

⁹ Mackintosh (1791), p.225.

¹⁰ Arrow (1950) and Riker (1982).

¹¹ Napoleon III can be considered the first populist politician of modern times.

¹² The Russian *narodniks*, although maybe the first to use the term populist, were not a populist movement as we understand it today. The People’s Party in the US.

¹³ Mussolini became Italy’s prime minister not as a result of an election but of a decision of King Victor Emmanuel II. However, until January 3, 1925, Mussolini governed in accordance to Italy’s parliamentary system.

¹⁴ Wertheimer (1931), p.66. For the impact of Le Bon on Hitler’s demagoguery see Müller Frøland (2017), p.128.

lasting addiction.¹⁵ After WWII, populism disappeared in the Old World while it thrived in South America. Argentina's Juan Perón is considered the quintessential Latin American populist leader. He was also one of the most successful politicians in modern history. Although he originally reached power through a military coup, he won the presidency in free elections with an overwhelming majority three times. There is probably no other country in the world in which a political leader active in the middle of the 20th century had such a profound and lasting impact. Perón ruled Argentina from mid 1943 until September 1955 and between 1973 and his death in 1974. Peronism has governed in thirty of the thirty-seven years since democracy was reestablished in Argentina.¹⁶ It not only dominates Argentine political, cultural and economic life but has also influenced other countries in Latin American. Chávez described himself as “a true Peronist.”¹⁷

Populists as Saviors

To understand populism it is useful to decompose it into three components.¹⁸ First, a simplistic, arbitrary and supposedly costless “solution” to structural problems that generate a widening divergence between the aspirations of a majority and reality (the “frustration gap”).¹⁹ Second, a charismatic and opportunistic politician that advocates the “populist solution” with a narrative that challenges the status quo and appeals to chauvinism and certain predominant beliefs, prejudices and anxieties that are culturally and temporally idiosyncratic. Third, a majority that finds the “populist solution” convincing and emotionally appealing and imposes it with its vote.²⁰

The populist solution is simplistic. Populist politicians always offer an explanation of the origin of the “frustration gap” that is easily understandable by voters with no education. Its effectiveness seems assured by its simplicity, which rests on the twin pillars of Manichaeism and paranoia. The essence of this populist is the struggle between good (“the people”) and evil (“the

¹⁵ Hitler was the first successful populist politician of the 20th century. However, late stage Nazism was not right-wing populism but totalitarianism. See Paxton (2004), Finchelstein (2017) and Eatwell (2007) for an analysis of the similarities and differences between populism and Nazi-fascism.

¹⁶ Some provinces in Argentina have been governed uninterruptedly by Peronism since 1983, when democracy was reinstated.

¹⁷ *La Nación*, 2008.

¹⁸ Ocampo (2018) and (2019).

¹⁹ Defining populism as a “solution” allows for the inclusion of populist manifestations such as Brexit into the analysis. No populist candidate won an election in England but a populist solution received a majority of the vote.

²⁰ In this context, a majority is defined as the minimum number of votes required in a specific electoral setting to secure the power of the executive.

enemy of the people”), the latter always conspiring to harm or exploit the former.²¹ This narrative, when effectively delivered, inevitably breeds resentment, which is populism’s psychological and emotional nutrient and one of the most powerful tools to manipulate the masses.

Second, the populist solution is arbitrary because it requires trampling on established institutions (formal and informal). Since the populist leader supposedly represents the “will of the people”, he or she is not subject to any institutional constraint. This arbitrariness is the antithesis of liberal democracy.

Third, the populist solution proposes to close the frustration gap at no cost to “the people.” The cost must be borne by those who the populist leaders identifies as “the enemies of the people.” The enemies can be domestic and foreign. The former are electoral minorities are persecuted and denied their rights; the latter are punished with department, embargos, punitive tariffs, nationalization and/or expropriations.²² The populist narrative provides a “justification” for this arbitrariness. As Tocqueville warned “to commit violent and unjust acts, it is not enough for a government to have the will, or even the power; the habits, ideas, and passions of the time must lend themselves to the committal of them.”²³

Finally, the populist solution is a false solution. It not only fails resolve the structural problems that generated the “frustration gap” that gave rise to populism but in fact actually worsens them.

The “frustration gap” is the sociological humus in which populism thrives. It is a necessary but not sufficient condition for its emergence. It can have an objective cause such as a crisis, war, great migration, technological progress or radical change in the international economic order (e.g., protectionism in the 1930s or deindustrialization due to globalization). It can also result from a subjective comparison of the present with unfulfilled expectations or with an idealized vision of the past. The success of the populist politician depends on his or her ability to promote such comparison.

²¹ Populist politicians conceive politics as described by Carl Schmitt: the only distinction which is valid in politics is antagonistic (Schmitt, 1927, 26). Although Schmitt was the ideologue of Nazism, his political ideas were revived by modern ideologues of left-wing populism such as Laclau (2005).

²² War and invasion are populism’s *ultima ratio*, particularly for extreme right-wing variants.

²³ De Tocqueville (1896), p. 131.

A widening frustration gap generates a reaction against a perceived cultural, ethnical or religious threat to the established order (or an idealized order that was supposedly lost not too long ago) or a demand for a redistribution of the economic resources “unfairly” generated by such order. Right wing populists emphasize the former whereas left wing populists the latter. The wider the gap, the more likely an opportunistic politician will be able to take advantage of it. This situation is common in societies that impoverished themselves after periods of prosperity (e.g., Argentina and Venezuela), those in which median incomes have stagnated for decades (e.g., the US), or those in which a majority feels that society’s culture, religious values and/or ethnic composition are threatened by “outsiders” (e.g., the US, Western and Eastern Europe).

The second essential ingredient of populism is the leader. To succeed politically, populism requires a charismatic and opportunistic politician that can “articulate” the populist narrative and link the disparate demands of a majority of the electorate that feels unsatisfied and frustrated with the status quo (what Laclau defined as “the logic of equivalence”).²⁴ The “narrative” plays a critical role in the emergence of successful populism: it explains in very simple terms the origin of “frustration gap” and what measures are required to close it. As already mentioned, this narrative always posits an antagonistic relationship between “the people” and the existing power structure that supposedly prevents its demands from being satisfied. According to Laclau, the “crystallization” of this antagonism is the essential and most important part of the populist leader’s “discourse.”²⁵ His or her electoral success depends on his or her ability to foster (or reinforce) a feeling of dissatisfaction with the status quo among a significantly large number of voters, which in turn requires convincing them that they don’t have the same standard of living, respect or recognition, of easily identifiable smaller groups (which, *ipso facto*, become the “enemy of the people”).

The populist leader is a narcissist who embodies in an exaggerated manner certain psychological and cultural traits that are typical of a country’s median voter. This facilitates the process of identification that Sigmund Freud explained so well in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the*

²⁴ In addition to developing a theory of populism, Ernesto Laclau also contributed to its practical implementation. Until his death in 2014 he was the intellectual mentor (and advisor) of several left-wing populist leaders that emerged in Latin America and Southern Europe.

²⁵ Laclau (2005), p.110.

Ego (1921) and that Laclau considered an essential ingredient of populism.²⁶ Those shared traits do not have a positive connotation. As mentioned earlier, the common denominator of left wing and right-wing populism is what Erich Fromm defined as malignant collective narcissism, a feeling of national superiority that manifests itself as racism and/or xenophobia.²⁷ This was as true for Hitler, Perón and Chávez, as it is for Trump, Erdogan and Orban.²⁸ To build up this feeling of superiority it is often necessary to re-interpret national history. In Latin America, where politics is imbued by magical realism, it is not uncommon for populist leaders to propose a metempsychosis with national heroes, as Chávez did with Bolívar in Venezuela and Perón did with San Martín in Argentina.

Finally, it is important to note that the electoral majority that brings a populist candidate to power is not a homogenous group of low-income voters but a coalition that cuts across all income levels.²⁹ In fact, in most modern democracies with a certain degree of economic and institutional development, the vote of the middle class is key to the electoral success of a populist candidate. A dissatisfied middle class is a better predictor of the rise of populism than the percentage of the population living below the poverty line.³⁰

The proposed definition allows for a distinction between populist politicians, populist policies and populist regimes. A populist politician proposes a populist solution to win an election (i.e., he is a demagogue). Electoral success and the effective implementation of the populist solution are the necessary conditions for the emergence of a populist regime. It is important to emphasize that populism can only arise in a democratic setting.³¹ Unelected dictators can resort to populist policies but this does not turn their regimes into populist regimes.

Laclau rightly emphasized that populism was not an ideology but “a way of constructing politics.”³² In reality, what determines the ideology of a particular populist strain is how the

²⁶ Freud [1921] pp.37-42.

²⁷ Fromm (1964) and Federico and Golec de Zavala (2018).

²⁸ As a well-known US political consultant explained, Trump is “an avatar” for the “worst instincts” and “deepest desires” of the American people (Wilson, 2018). A great number of voters channeled their resentment through him.

²⁹ Even in the case of Peron, who is usually associated with the “shirtless” poor peasants, won his first election in February 1946 with a significant urban middle class and even some high-income voters that adhered to catholic nationalism.

³⁰ Two caveats bear mentioning. First, there is a negative relationship between poverty and institutional quality. Second, under certain circumstances steadily rising poverty levels might be an indication of a shrinking middle class, which is a good predictor for the rise of populism.

³¹ Neither Mao nor Castro were populist leaders but dictators. Maduro is the leader of an authoritarian regime.

³² Laclau (2005), p.6 and Mouffé (2018), p.10.

populist leader identifies the “enemy of the people.”³³ This identification is culturally and temporally idiosyncratic. Right-wing populists tend to define the “enemy” along ethnic, religious or cultural dimensions. Left-wing populists instead define it by an economic dimension –such as income or wealth levels– within a class-struggle narrative. A foreign enemy is common to both.³⁴ Right wing populists promise the defense of a threatened cultural and/or ethnic status quo (or an idealized past version of it), while left wing populists promise a future nirvana that can be achieved by confiscating resources from those who benefit from the status quo.

The experience in the 2016 primary and presidential elections in the United States serves to illustrate this point. Both parties had populist candidates –Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders– who agreed on the underlying problem (the “American dream is over”) but proposed alternative explanations of the origin of the “frustration gap” and identified different groups or nations as “enemies of the people.” Consequently they also proposed different solutions. According to Trump, the culprits of America’s decline were unfair competition from Mexico and China and Muslims.³⁵ Sanders, on the other hand, blamed income inequality and Wall Street bankers, an explanation that is also shared by a significant portion of the electorate. Their respective “solution” was different: Trump proposed tariffs and deportment (“make foreigners pay”), while Sanders higher taxes on the top 1% (“make the rich pay”).

At the risk of stating the obvious, a few other clarifications are in order. First, there is no direct univocal relationship between an ideology and populism: i.e., a right or left wing politician can win an election without necessarily resorting to demagoguery. Second, the common denominator to all forms of populism is extreme nationalism but it can be packaged with a right or left wing ideology. As Erich Fromm explained in *Heart of Man*, extreme nationalism is a form of malignant collective narcissism. Its most obvious and frequent symptom is a belief in “the superiority of one’s group and the inferiority of all others.” When anything threatens this sense of superiority, the predictable emotional reaction is aggression and resentment.³⁶

³³ Carl Schmidt, the legal ideologue of the Nazi party, was the first to propose this dichotomy as a political strategy.

³⁴ This also explains why economic autarchy and protectionism are common denominators for right-wing and left-wing populist regimes.

³⁵ Although the evidence shows that automation was a much more important factor. See Acemoglu and Restrepo (2017).

³⁶ Fromm (1964), p.85-86.

The identification of the “enemy of the people” not only defines the ideology of a populist regime but also its economic policy. Left-wing populists try to improve the material welfare of their constituencies by redistributing income and wealth from high-income voters through taxation, expropriations or outright confiscations, while right wing populists will redistribute resources from minorities or foreigners with protectionism and intervention in markets for goods, labor and capital.³⁷ In both scenarios, these policies inevitably fail to achieve their stated objective. The inevitable widening of the “frustration gap” threatens the stability and continuity of the populist regime.

As Aristotle and Polybius anticipated more than two millennia ago, populism tends to degenerate into autocracy. It has political life cycle with three stages: demagogy (to win the election), ochlocracy (the implementation of the “populist solution”) and autocracy (to stay in power in the face of growing discontent). In the first stage, populism is a contender for power and, in the last two, an incumbent. The dynamics of each of these stages are different and their length can vary due to economic, cultural and institutional factors. Not all populist regimes reach the final stage. Strong cultural and institutional antibodies can break the cycle.

The first stage always requires legitimization by the popular vote. Even Hitler had to go through it.³⁸ In the second stage, the regime may appear to be “closing” the frustration gap with some degree of success. But this is a mirage disguised by favorable exogenous factors or an unsustainable redistribution of resources at the expense of those minorities identified as the “enemies of the people.” However, these minorities can evade these exactions via capital flight and/or emigration or its resources are depleted. Over time, the institutional degradation implied by the arbitrariness of the populist regime and the absence of structural reforms ensures that the “frustration gap” widens. The electoral coalition that brought the demagogue to power splinters and becomes a threat to his/her political survival. This opens the door to populism’s third stage: autocracy. With free elections, the broad and growing discontent threatens the survival of the populist regime. The populist leader usually reacts to this threat by doubling down, using state

³⁷ Although the populist “solution” always requires or involves some form of arbitrary redistribution of economic resources (even the right wing variety) not all redistribution is necessarily populist.

³⁸ Before being appointed Chancellor in 1933 Hitler was a demagogue “of the first water”. This doesn’t mean equating Nazism with populism. The former is an ideology whereas the latter a political strategy in a democratic setting. Except for nationalism populism is ideologically empty. Nationalism in turn can have any ideology and not necessarily be populist. These conceptual distinctions are essential to an understanding of populism.

controlled media to promote a conspiratorial narrative (the crisis is due to the perverse deeds of the “enemies of the people”) and systematically abusing executive power (by violating property rights, restricting press freedom and tampering with the electoral system). If a democracy does not have strong antibodies, it is eventually destroyed, and, in its last stage, if ever reached, populism mutates into a dictatorship. History shows that populist regimes can quickly evolve towards authoritarianism (e.g., Venezuela under Chavez and Maduro) or totalitarianism (e.g., Germany under Hitler).³⁹ Understanding populism requires distinguishing these different stages and their respective dynamics.

In a paper that has become a classic, economists Rudiger Dornbusch and Sebastian Edwards defined the typical Latin American populist economic policy paradigm as a set of measures that seek to redistribute income and expand aggregate demand as if the country faced no economic or financial constraints.⁴⁰ Populist policymakers reject the idea that deficit financing through monetary expansion can lead to high inflation. In their mind, fostering consumption through expansive fiscal and monetary policies is non-inflationary because it leads to an expansion of real output. In reality, as Dornbusch and Edwards pointed out, it generally leads to stagflation.

From an economic standpoint, the Latin American variants of populism have followed three phases: first, a short-term boom fueled by wage increases and expansionary fiscal and monetary policies; second, increasing bottlenecks that lead to creeping inflation and foreign-exchange shortages; and third, a full-blown crisis followed by a period of adjustment (sometimes under a non-populist government). Usually, at the end of the cycle, average real wages are lower. There is a strong association between the economic and political phases of populism. From an economic standpoint, the first phase coincides with its second political stage, and the second and third, with its degeneration into autocracy or the revival of democracy.⁴¹

Whether right or left wing, as Jean Tirole has pointed out, populist policymakers have contempt “for elementary economic mechanisms.”⁴² In essence, populism is “anti-economics”, as it rejects the idea that society, and therefore government, faces any constraints. Populist policies are predicated on the assumption that if any constraints actually exist they were imposed by internal

³⁹ The Nazi regime went from the first phase to the last in two months thanks to the Enabling Act.

⁴⁰ Dornbusch and Edwards (1991).

⁴¹ *ibidem*.

⁴² Tirole (2018), pp.28-29.

and/or external forces inimical to the interests of “the people.” It follows logically from this premise, that in order to eliminate the former it is necessary to neutralize the latter. This is the essence of a populist program.

The Populist Threat

Decades ago, Paul Samuelson warned that Schumpeter’s prediction about the inevitable demise of capitalism was correct but required a redefinition of socialism. In his view, the biggest threat to Western mixed-advanced economies was not the Soviet or Maoist version of socialism, nor its 1970s Scandinavian variety or the one proposed by Oskar Lange in the 1930s, but the type of populism prevalent in South America, particularly the one Juan Perón imposed on Argentina.⁴³ Until very recently, it seemed as if this reformulation of Schumpeter’s famous prophecy would meet the same fate as the original. The resurgence of populism in the Western world in recent years, suggests that it will not. The populist virus is insidious and strong institutional anti-bodies are needed to prevent it from infecting and destroying liberal democracies.

Understanding of the threat posed by populism is increasingly relevant. As Peruvian intellectual Mario Vargas Llosa recently pointed out, “the worst and most dangerous enemy of democracy is no longer communism, but populism.”⁴⁴ Unlike the former, which attacked liberal democracy frontally and sometimes violently, populism works from within, neutralizing its antibodies. If not stopped, populism evolves towards authoritarianism. With different strategies and at different speeds, communism and populism achieve the same goal: the destruction of liberal democracy.

Which brings us to the crux of the matter. According to James Buchanan, the institutions of a liberal democracy can only survive if a majority of the members of society share three fundamental beliefs and values: autonomy, Kantian interdependence and collective good sense. The first requires that most people trust that their success (or failure) depends on their own effort. The greater the conviction that external forces interfere or limit an individual’s chances of progress, the lower general confidence will be and the greater the manifestation of anti-social behavior. The second requires that a majority of society values fairness, justice, respect and tolerance for others and explicitly deplore and actively fight against fraud, deceit, theft,

⁴³ Samuelson (1980).

⁴⁴ Vargas Llosa and Vargas Llosa (2018).

dishonesty and corruption. The last of Buchanan's conditions implies that people recognize the limits of collective action. This belief is obviously related to a society's worldview or predominant ideology. It implies that a majority of voters has its feet on the ground and will not be duped by demagogues who promise utopian projects of social or economic transformation. If a majority of the electorate does not understand that the collective will (embodied in the state) cannot override economic laws in the medium and long term, freedom or growth will likely not survive says Buchanan.⁴⁵

Because populism is not a calamity imposed by nature but an electoral choice made by a society's majority, the main and possibly only antidote is a strong civic culture rooted in the values listed by Buchanan. However, it is in human nature to forget the lessons of the past and to learn mostly through personal experience. Polybius warned centuries ago that "as soon as a new generation has arisen, and democracy has descended to their children's children, long association weakens their value for equality and freedom" and opens the door to demagogues.

Preserving liberty requires constant and thankless efforts. Populism is an insidious virus that corrodes democracy from within. As John Stuart Mill explained societies that fail to understand this are likely to succumb to the populist temptation and put their freedom and prosperity in danger:

A people may prefer a free government; but if, from indolence, or carelessness, or cowardice, or want of public spirit, they are unequal to the exertions necessary for preserving it; if they will not fight for it when it is directly attacked; if they can be deluded by the artifices used to cheat them out of it; if, by momentary discouragement, or temporary panic, or a fit of enthusiasm for an individual, they can be induced to lay their liberties at the feet even of a great man or trust him with powers which enable him to subvert their institutions—in all these cases they are more or less unfit for liberty; and though it may be for their good to have had it even for a short time, they are unlikely long to enjoy it.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Buchanan (2005), pp. 12-18.

⁴⁶ Mill [1861], pp.14-15.

As recent events show, this warning not only applies to the fledging democracies of the Third World but also to the oldest standing and functioning democracy.

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