

From Vanguard of the Proletariat to *Vox Populi*: Left-populism as a ‘Shadow’ of Contemporary Socialism

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Left-populism is a phenomenon attracting much attention, particularly in Latin America, but also increasingly in Europe. It is not a wholly new phenomenon; indeed it is a long-standing tradition shadowing more orthodox socialist approaches. However, the decline of traditional Marxism allows contemporary left-populism to adopt a specific post-Cold War form with some parallels and key differences between Europe and Latin America. This new left-populism has the potential to become a major feature of contemporary (left) politics, albeit one often still in the shadow of traditional socialist approaches. Like so many other forms of populism, left-populism has both a progressive and an illiberal ‘dark side’ that depends very much on context and the nature of the populist actor, but it should not be seen as inevitably inimical to democracy.

Over a generation ago, populism was called a “specter haunting the world.”¹ In the 1980s and 1990s, the rise of ‘neopopulism’ (in Latin America) and ‘new populism’ (in Europe) led to even more concern. Most recently, the emergence of ‘left-populism’ in Latin America has, like all other populisms before it, caused consternation among analysts and policymakers for its allegedly contagious effect on national and regional democracy and stability.

What is this left-populism, how ‘new’ is it, and how does it relate to different forms of populism before it? Does it truly have the corrosive effects that some ascribe to it? Before addressing such questions, one must note that the voluminous populism literature barely defines ‘left populism’ as a concept. Many studies of populism are broad conceptual studies that engage with the concept *in toto*, not with its application to some section of the political spectrum.² The main exceptions are studies of the European new populism, focused almost exclusively on right-wing variants that have

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made their mark on contemporary Europe.³ This is despite recent electoral successes in Europe for several figures who combine populist traits with a more marked left-wing emphasis, such as Róbert Fico in Slovakia. They have hardly received any academic attention. The questions of what they represent, and whether they have anything in common with ‘left-populism’ elsewhere, remain unanswered.

Accordingly, the aim of this article is to provide an overview of the contemporary left-populist spectrum with three main contributions. First is a definition of ‘left-populism’. Second is an outline of the commonalities and differences among some prominent left-populist actors in Europe and Latin America, where the left-populist resurgence is most marked. Finally, the article offers a summary of the reasons for and consequences of contemporary left-populist successes.

While acknowledging that left-populism has a longstanding pedigree, this analysis argues that contemporary forms have developed out of a specific post-Cold War matrix and have identifiable commonalities in ideology and political style that mark them as instances of a similar phenomenon, albeit with marked differences between Europe and Latin America. This new left-populism is still in its infancy but has the potential to become a major feature of contemporary left politics. Whereas it generally remains in the shadow of traditional socialist approaches in Western Europe, it is an increasingly successful challenge to them in Latin America and Eastern Europe. Like so many other forms of populism, left-populism has both a progressive and an illiberal ‘dark side’ that depends very much on context and the nature of the populist actor. However, left-populism is not *intrinsically* inimical to democracy, and therefore we may disregard the most lurid concerns.

Just What Is Left-populism?

Considerations of space allow us to sidestep the definitional questions that bedevil the definition of populism. Following Mudde, this article defines populism as “*an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into*

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*two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people.”*⁴ Defining populism as an ideology should certainly not imply intellectual robustness or consistency; as Peter Wiles has said, it is a syndrome not a doctrine.⁵ Populism is a ‘thin-

centered’ ideology whose lack of intellectual consistency is often deliberate. It is (like nationalism), easily combinable with many ‘fuller’ ideologies such as conservatism or socialism.⁶ Defining populism as an ideology does

not obviate all definitional problems. Populism is a 'chameleonic' concept that adapts itself to circumstance and context and which has become so ubiquitous in politics that some talk of a populist *Zeitgeist*.⁷ Nevertheless, this minimal ideological definition identifies the necessary and sufficient features of a populist. Populism certainly implies a distinct political style (often involving 'everyday' language, an appeal to 'gut feelings', and simplistic slogans and solutions—what Mudde refers to as *Stammtisch* (barroom politics)). It implies an identifiable form of organization—fluid structures and direct mobilization behind a personalized, charismatic leader.⁸ But while this style and organization clearly facilitate the ability of the populist leader to mobilize the *volonté générale*, charismatic authority, anti-institutional mobilization, simplistic language, and a reliance on slogans are features shared by many non-populist actors. The ideological focus on the 'corrupt elite' versus 'moral people' dichotomy is not.

Because it is a 'thin-centered' ideology, populism may be of the left or the right, but it is inherently of neither. Indeed, populism's moral and emotional emphasis is inherently anti-programmatic, while its emphasis on mobilizing a homogenous people against a rapacious political elite implies a blurring of traditional social divisions among the people. Notably, the classical Latin American populists of the mid-twentieth century are difficult to classify on a left-right spectrum. Leaders such as Perón combined 'economic populism'—a redistributive and statist import-substitution industrialization reminiscent of Keynesianism—with political nationalism and a cross-class mobilization strategy.

Nevertheless, whilst populism's anti-intellectualism, cross-class appeal and ideological amorphousness have often made it suspect to the traditional left, leftists have been able to find affinity with some of its intentions which *prima facie* look like "a wish list for a socialist and radical-democratic agenda"—anti-elitism, empowerment, inclusiveness, morality and welfarism.⁹ Michael Kazin argues that prior to the 1940s, American populism was usually associated with socialist sentiments, and indeed, it has a modern expression in the anti-corporate platforms of Ralph Nader and left Democrats such as the late Paul Wellstone.¹⁰ Among the most famous left-wing populists were the Russian *Narodniki* of the 19th century. Their ideas informed Lenin's and therefore Marxism-Leninism as a whole, especially its radical rejection of constitutional limits on the state and its assertion of the revolutionary potential of the peasantry.¹¹

Indeed, several writers argue that socialism is intrinsically populist. Even in the early 20th century, the struggle for electoral relevance led socialist parties to broaden the class struggle to the 'people,' rather than simply confine it to the proletariat (a minority force in most democracies).¹² Ernesto Laclau has called socialism "the highest form of populism," on similar grounds.¹³ Because a Marxist sees the interests of the proletariat as universal, it is a small step to elide the distinction between proletariat and people and to struggle for all-national interests in the national-liberation struggle. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union's declaration in the 1960s that it was a 'party of the Soviet people' appeared to indicate that populism had become mainstream.

However, this argument can be overstated: Marxism-Leninism's concern with doctrinal purity and correct class politics only evaporated under Gorbachev, while the emphasis on the elite party of dedicated revolutionaries and communist socialization is inherently anti-populist. Populists do not aim to educate or change their chosen people, and argue that "the consciousness of the people, generally referred to as *common sense*, is the basis of all good [politics]."¹⁴ For the Marxist-Leninist, the Party is the epicenter of politics: it leads and guides popular interests, rather than simply reflecting them, hence the often anti-populist communist campaigns of the Soviet Union such as Gorbachev's 1985–86 anti-alcohol campaign that sought to instill labor discipline among the Soviet people.

So just what is left-populism? Left-populists are 'populist' in that the 'moral people versus corrupt elite' dichotomy is central to their ideology. They generally have far less concern with doctrinal purity and class-consciousness than the traditional left. They adopt organizational features common to other populist parties across the political spectrum, such as the emphasis on a charismatic leader who has unmediated communication with his people and distaste for formal organization. Nevertheless, they are 'left' in their emphasis on egalitarianism, and their identification of economic inequity as the basis of existing political and social arrangements. The espousal of collective economic and social rights for their chosen people constitutes their principal agenda. More radical leftists will espouse anti-capitalism (or at least opposition to neo-liberalism). Defining 'left-populism' in more detail faces both the difficulty of defining 'left' in the contemporary world and the fact that populism itself is so amorphous, non-ideological, and context-specific.¹⁵

Left-populists in Contemporary Europe

The dominance of right-wing variants in European populism may be about to change. Certainly, right-populism has not always been dominant. As Mudde argues, from the late 1960s until the early 1980s, the main European populist critique came from the (new) left, principally the student movements of 1968, the New Left and New Social Movements in the 1970s, and the Green or New Politics parties in the early 1980s.¹⁶ Such New Politics parties had archetypal populist features, including an aversion to existing politics and elites, and a claim to represent the common sense of 'the people.' Nevertheless, as the 1980s progressed, many New Politics parties de-radicalized, leaving a vacuum to be exploited by the new right-wing populism, which could address the decline of the Keynesian post-war settlement and left-wing disorientation, arguing that social democrats had joined the establishment and "sold out."¹⁷ Most notably, Jean-Marie Le-Pen's National Front traded on the decline of the French Communist Party and gained stable support among the working class.¹⁸ The right-populists were relatively flexible actors, more able than the left to exploit less 'politically correct' concerns such as perceived ethnic, local and regional grievances, while they generally adapted to neo-liberalism's anti-state and individualist emphasis.

However, the collapse of communism has opened up space for a newer European left-populism. The communists have all but vanished as a dynamic electoral force, taking with them the most doctrinaire and conservative forms of organized socialism. The traditional social-democratic left (such as German Social Democratic Party and the British Labour Party) has moved 'rightwards' (particularly in office) to become social-liberal, if not neo-liberal, and thereby increasing the perception that the mainstream left is an embedded part of the establishment. The enlargement of the EU has occurred concurrently with high levels of perceived insecurity among its member states, of which socioeconomic concerns (jobs, welfare, and benefits) are a major component. Finally, the ascendance of the neo-liberal model has become increasingly doubtful on a global scale—the 'Asian crisis', economic travails in new democracies (Latin America above all), and continuing global inequalities make anti-capitalism a significant strand of the 'anti-globalization' sentiments that have grown since the late 1990s.

The result is a definite increase in populism among the left, either as a stylistic and tactical measure, or, increasingly, as a core component of ideology. In Western Europe, parties such as the Dutch Socialist Party (SP), the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), or German Left Party (PDS) articulate similar themes and have gained a niche in their respective party systems. Though emerging from very different socialist traditions (from Maoist to Trotskyist to Marxist-Leninist), such parties combine a democratic socialist ideology with a strong populist discourse. They downplay Marxist ideological purity and present themselves as the *vox populi*, not just the vanguard of the proletariat, which may cause them to toy with non-traditional identity concerns. For example, the SSP supports Scottish independence, for which it has been strongly criticized by the English Socialist Workers Party. These parties have a marked anti-establishment stance. For example, one SP leader considers the political elite as "neo-liberal Ayatollahs" who live by different rules than the majority of the population.¹⁹

The concept of an idealized 'heartland' is a central component of populist ideology. The left-populists present an idealized version of a social democratic society before it began to 'rot' under the influence of 20 years of neo-liberalism and betrayal by "mainstream" social-democratic parties.²⁰ Although they retain a rhetorical loyalty to their working class base, this is often interpreted rather broadly and inclusively. SSP Member of the Scottish Parliament Carolyn

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Leckie has talked of reaching "people who wouldn't know who Trotsky was from Lulu [a Scottish pop star of the 1960s]."²¹ The SSP's further trajectory has been typical of a populist party. It obtained seven percent of the vote and

six seats in the Scottish parliament in 2003 on the basis of an anti-establishment slogan of “Dare to be different,” and deep sentiment against the Iraq War. It was led by Tommy Sheridan, an overtly populist leader: charismatic, high-profile (often voted one of Scotland’s ‘Greatest Living Scots’), prone to making ostentatious gestures such as taking an ‘average worker’s’ salary to prove that he was ‘with the people,’ and on several occasions risking prison to defend the party’s position.

Since Sheridan’s removal as leader in November 2004 (for alleged sexual peccadilloes) the SSP has struggled electorally, and its future electoral success is in doubt, as it obtained just 1.9 percent in the 2005 UK general election (compared with 3.1 percent in 2001). After winning a court case to defend his name in August 2006, Sheridan split the SSP and founded a new movement, ironically named Solidarity. Among the many reasons for the split is the SSP’s inability to find the balance between charismatic and collective leadership.²² The inability to routinize charisma is one of the major weaknesses of populist parties.

In Eastern Europe, the Left Party PDS has been the most prominent left-populist party. Until 2005 it was the Eastern German Party of Democratic Socialism, whose success was attributable to its ability both to harness cross-class nostalgia for the German Democratic Republic (*Ostalgie*) and to present itself as a principled critic of the federal political elites. In July 2005, it joined with the Election Alternative for Labour and Social Justice (WASG), the West German trade union movement led by former Finance Minister Oskar Lafontaine, and gained a much greater national profile, with 8.7 percent of the vote and 54 seats in the autumn elections to the German national parliament (*Bundestag*). In doing so, it betrayed a markedly populist style, with ‘Red Oskar’ (Lafontaine) attacking *Fremdarbeiter* (foreign workers), a word with Nazi-era overtones.²³

In many cases, however, a continued concern with doctrinal questions limits left parties’ consistent adoption of populism, and they might be better described as populist leftists rather than left-populists. For instance, the Left Party. PDS strategy results from competition between four main movements (including pragmatists and communists), of which the populist “radical-alternative wing” is just one.²⁴ Post-Sheridan, some within the SSP have called for the party to reinforce internal democracy and to return to more traditional left-libertarian concerns, such as gender equality.²⁵ However, there have been recent instances of less socialist left-populist parties gaining electoral success.

These parties often emerge behind a prominent leader and combine left-wing slogans with a still more amorphous and non-ideological emphasis, and they trade on antiestablishment sentiment and the policy failure of the social democrats. For example, the Lithuanian Labour Party gained 28.4 percent in the October 2004 legislative elections to become Lithuania’s second-biggest party. Founded only that year, the party campaigned on unabashed left-populist slogans, calling for placing “politicians and public servants . . . on equal footing with ordinary citizens,” building a “socially oriented market economy” and even saying, “We are and will be called popu-

lists.”²⁶ In the view of left-wing critics, it “was able to rocket from nothing to its current electoral success on the back of a few radical-sounding slogans about defending poor, hard-working Lithuanians.”²⁷

Similarly, in June 2006 Direction-Social Democracy gained 29.1 percent in Slovakia’s legislative elections and its leader Róbert Fico became premier. Formed in 1999, the party gained popularity by exploiting resentment against the neo-liberalism of the Dzurinda government and occasionally by capitalizing on anti-Romany feeling.²⁸ In October 2006, the party was expelled by the Party of European Socialists group in the European parliament for its controversial governing coalition with the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia headed by former autocrat Meciar and the far-right Slovak National Party, a coalition which had allegedly rendered “Fico’s government policies highly ambivalent and largely unpredictable.”²⁹ Fico responded in populist style by arguing that his party had been punished “for its policy to the benefit of people.”³⁰

In Russia, the archetypal such party would be the Motherland bloc, which gained nine percent of the vote in December 2003 on a left-nationalist platform that combined ‘protest populism and identity populism’—in the party’s own terms ‘social patriotism’—epitomized by proposals to expropriate wealth from Russia’s plutocrats (oligarchs) and to restore popular control over the authorities.³¹ The party’s ideological position oscillated depending on leadership intrigue and opportunity, exploiting the popular backlash against welfare reform (January 2005) and Muscovite anti-immigrant sentiment, before its growing popularity angered the Kremlin and its leadership was replaced in March 2006. In all these cases, left-populists exploit left slogans without concern for ideological consistency. In Motherland’s case the party combines the economic values of the left with the political values of the right. Their greater ideological indeterminacy vis-à-vis those parties who retain some attachment to Marxism appears to be an asset in exploiting protest sentiment and maximizing their vote.

Left-populism in Latin America

The prevalence of populism in Latin America relative to Europe has a number of explanations. European politics remains party politics in which the role of structured mass-class parties was dominant until the middle of the 20th century. In Latin America, catch-all parties and prominent personalities have always played a greater role, increasing the propensity to ideological eclecticism and flexibility that create fertile ground for populism.³² The decline of oligarchic rule in the early 20th century and increasing enfranchisement encouraged the simultaneous mobilization of previously excluded social strata unattached to established parties. Cycles of authoritarian breakdown and democratization encouraged the sense of crisis and elite-led mass-mobilization on which populism thrives. The movement from agro-export to state-led rapid industrialization encouraged the leftist emphasis of the classical populists, whose socio-economic program was essentially social democratic, whilst the emergence of presidential ‘delegative democracies’ increased the scope for populism as an entrenched part of politics.³³

While mass left parties did emerge in Latin America, the predominant model was ‘mass populist parties’, those which preserved much autonomy for the charismatic leader at the head of the social movement, and which were loosely institutionalized with fluid and unstable links to trade unions and their wider electorate.³⁴ These contrasted with the ‘mass-bureaucratic’ left-wing parties that possessed stable institutionalized links with social movements and social classes in much of Western Europe. These relatively stable European party systems account for the relative weakness of populism there and the fact that many of the left-populist parties mentioned above in western Europe remain so far relatively minor players in their party systems. It might be added that the parliamentary system gives less scope to charismatic leadership, and that left-populists usually have to share the political space with strongly institutionalized social-democratic parties who themselves are not averse to occasional populist tactics.

It is not that ‘mass-bureaucratic’ left parties did not exist in Latin America, but simply that they often played second fiddle to mass populist organizations. One exception was Chile, where the Chilean party system evolved along a more similar path to the European cases than its Latin American neighbors, with a stronger anchor in civil society (especially labor), and therefore the Chilean left has been more programmatic and less charismatic in character than other left parties in the region.³⁵ However, more often the classical populists co-opted left-wing socioeconomic strata and slogans in personality-centred movements that owed little or nothing ideologically to socialism (Peronism being a key example). Occasionally, they more explicitly co-opted left-wing parties and ideas (for example when the Chilean Popular Socialist Party supported Carlos Ibañez del Campo from 1952–58). The Latin American left was strongly class conscious, doctrinaire, and often sectarian, a trait it shared with many communist and socialist parties in Western Europe, but which especially limited its electoral dividends in a presidential system, despite significant mass support. In most cases, the commitment of the left to revolutionary social change meant that it “deliberately avoided electoral competition altogether”—a great contrast to the revolutionary left in Western Europe, the main representatives of which crossed the Rubicon into electoral politics irrevocably after World War II.³⁶

The process of late 20th century democratization modified this process somewhat, with a strong labor-capital cleavage emerging in the most industrialized nations, and bringing with it greater potential for an institutionalized working class organization. Cleary (following Roberts) distinguishes between those Latin American “elitist party systems” where “parties organize *across* lines of socioeconomic class” (for example Colombia or El Salvador), and those “labor mobilizing” countries (such as Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, and Mexico), which organize around social class, based on higher union density, larger manufacturing sectors, greater economic *dirigisme*, and previous social movement organization in the 1980s or 1990s. In the former countries, the left remains disorganized and weak; in the latter, the left is everywhere a “credible contender for power.”³⁷ The

left's rise in Latin America is predicated on (at least) five factors: persistent extreme social equality; disillusion with neo-liberalism and the Washington Consensus; the decision of the left to accept electoral politics; the weakening of the political and institutional support for the center-right governments dominant in the early stages of democratic transition; and the left's "loss of geopolitical stigma" after the Cold War.³⁸ These reasons are strikingly similar to the 'return of the left' in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s, when a succession of wholly or partially reformed 'successor parties' (former ruling communist parties) ousted center-right anticommunist administrations across most of the region.

However, while the distinction between 'elitist' and 'labor-mobilizing' countries accounts for why the left in general is stronger in some countries rather than others, it does not account for why the left in some countries (Venezuela, Bolivia, and Argentina) is more populist than others (such as Brazil and Chile). Whereas left-wing parties in the latter countries have adopted moderate center-left programs that have not threatened democracy, have perpetuated neo-liberal economic reforms with little modification while in office, and maintain a pragmatic relationship with the U.S., the former have combined radical opposition to neo-liberalism and U.S.-sponsored free trade with the anti-elitism, personalism, and centralism of classical populism. Hugo Chávez is the archetypal populist, with anti-institutionalism and Manicheanism translating into a governing style combining a 'permanent revolution' of social mobilization and confrontation, epitomized by proposals to set up an 'Axis of Good' against the 'Axis of Evil' led by George W. 'Satan' Bush. Evo Morales of Bolivia came to power with an archetypal populist image, his striped woolly *chompa* emphasizing his ordinariness and strengthening his claim to be the candidate of "the most disdained, discriminated against."³⁹ Strong populist traits have been identified also in Néstor Kirchner of Argentina's strident opposition to IMF-sponsored neo-liberal reform. Moreover, Andrés Manuel López Obrador's narrow second place finish in the July 2006 Mexican presidential elections was accompanied by a 'man of the people' image, promises to halve his presidential salary, and was followed by a highly populist campaign to contest the disputed election, culminating in his September 2006 call for a parallel government and constitutional changes to ensure institutions work 'for all people.'

So why the attraction to left-populism? As is usual for populism, its specific form and effect depends much on context. Venezuela and Bolivia's relative energy independence allows leaders to promise economic largesse to

the have-nots and promote autarky. However, only Venezuela's oil reserves give its leader real maneuverability against regional and international economic elites and even Morales has been forced to moderate his anti-capitalist rhetoric.⁴⁰ Populism often emerges as a response to a specific political crisis

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when the existing 'establishment' has a crisis of legitimacy. We can see this in Venezuela where Chávez's rise to power occurred against the backdrop of severe disaffection with the mainstream political establishment and crises such as the 1989 riots and failed 1992 coup, in Argentina, where Kirchner trades on the anti-market backlash caused by the debacle of IMF-sponsored economic austerity in the 1990s, and in Mexico, where López Obrador can articulate deeply-held historical grievances about electoral manipulation. However, Castañeda convincingly puts the roots of left-populism further in the past. He demonstrates that it has a strong *ideological* tradition in Latin America. Inspired by the view of the classical populists as national founding fathers and benefactors of the poor and Castro's populist *poder popular*, the Latin American Left is often more nationalist and populist than concerned with social policy.⁴¹ It is profoundly authoritarian in essence, and Chávez and his ilk owe more to the Peronists of the past than the 'socialism of the 21st century' they claim to build. Where the left has taken a more moderate anti-populist direction, it has emerged from more orthodox socialist traditions that have reacted against the often violent repression they suffered under authoritarian rule. Authoritarianism, and fears of authoritarian reversal, are often why the left has moderated. This is particularly the case with the Socialist Party of Chile - suppression under Pinochet has driven its subsequent moderation.⁴² For the moderate left, Cuba has been a more negative role model (despite much lingering emotional attachment to Castro). Chávez' own politics have further divided left opinion due to his marginalization of workers movements and trade unions, repelling as many as they inspire.⁴³

Left-populism as a 'Shadow' of Socialism

What are the political consequences of left-wing populism? In itself, populism is a neutral phenomenon, not a 'pathology'. Indeed, one of the most persuasive accounts of populism, by Margaret Canovan, argues that populism is a perceptive critique of the democratic limitations within liberal democracies: it is hostile to *liberal* democracy or *representative* democracy, especially constitutional limits on the expression of the general will, and the implicitly elitist gap between the people's representatives and the people itself.⁴⁴ Populism is thus democracy's 'shadow' because the gap between performance and promise of liberal democracy provides a perpetual stimulus to populist mobilization "that follows democracy like a shadow."⁴⁵ The awareness of democratic deficiencies has been much increased in the contemporary world, by a combination of the increasing role of the media, globalization and the limitation of traditional state capacity, and the decline of other ideological challenges to democracy, providing far less forgiving social attitudes towards the deficiencies of democratic institutions and a corresponding increase in charismatic authority.⁴⁶ As such, populism has become integral to contemporary democratic political discourse. To the degree that this populism raises elite awareness of popular concerns and provides for the representation of the excluded it is not *necessarily* a nega-

tive phenomenon, however uncomfortable it is for political elites. For this reason, René Cuperus of the Dutch Labour Party has argued that social democracy should become “more ‘populist’ in a leftist way” by addressing the concerns of those left behind by economic and cultural modernization and by disengaging with technocratic strategies such as the Blairite ‘Third Way’ that downplay political conflict.⁴⁷ In this way a left-populism can arguably be ‘civilized’ because it removes populism from monopolization by the authoritarian and xenophobic extreme right. Moreover, although often radical in rhetoric, populism is inherently reformist in orientation. It is a critique of democracy, not an alternative to it, and its practice in government (because it usually lacks organizational robustness, consistent programmatic orientation, and indeed a clear model of what a contemporary ‘people’s democracy’ might look like) has tended to be tamed by the exigencies of power.⁴⁸

However, populism’s critique of democracy means that it is democracy’s shadow in a darker way.⁴⁹ Its maximalist interpretation of democracy without limitations means that it is potentially illiberal, even extremist, and intolerant of constitutional limits that frustrate the unmediated will of the people.⁵⁰ It is in potential profoundly destabilizing, because such democratic aspirations raise expectations which both the political elite and the ‘tamed’ populist actors are often simply unable to fulfill, engendering a vicious cycle of populist mobilization and demobilization (as evident in Venezuela, where in order to maintain the ‘revolutionary’ momentum of *Chavismo*, institutions have to be constantly reshaped and the masses mobilized). The emergence of political actors whose main *raison d’être* is criticism of the ‘establishment’ but who are consistently unable to represent their ‘people’ once in office is hardly a constructive phenomenon. Moreover, whereas in more established democracies, populism might be limited to raising the concerns of the excluded and putting pressure on states for redistributive reforms, it is potentially far more deleterious in newer democracies where the ‘rules of the game’ are more contested and constraints on populist actors are weaker: here, populism’s association with charismatic leadership and organizational de-institutionalization has a natural tendency towards messianic leadership promoting authoritarian leadership and passive masses: a trait of particular danger in Latin America’s elitist “delegative democracies.”⁵¹ Left-populism can certainly be seen as *relatively* ‘civilized’ because it emphasizes formal social and political egalitarianism and inclusively rather than the openly exclusivist anti-immigrant or anti-foreigner concerns of the populist right (i.e. its concern is the *demos*, but not the *ethnos*), but if it becomes truly populist the exaltation of the demands of the people as the highest value is implicitly exclusivist, becoming the “tyranny of the majority” warned against by John Stuart Mill. So the challenge for the left is to become populist in style, but not populist in substance.

That left-populism is not pathological should warn us against stark divisions into the ‘right’ non-populist and ‘wrong’ populist left as proposed by Castañeda.⁵² There is a whole range of left-populist approaches, and it is not in everyone (as Chávez and Sheridan) that the shadow becomes the

substance and the personalist, messianic elements come to the fore. The word 'populist' can be used as blanket condemnation by the left's opponents. Attacking López Obrador's allegedly 'dangerous populism' was an election tactic of his PAN opponents: his populism conceals a strong (albeit redistributionist) economic record as Mexico City Mayor, a "long-overdue concern for the plight of Mexico's struggling majority" and a relative political moderation that may owe more to the centrism of the PRI than to the influence of Chávez or Morales.⁵³ Even Castañeda concedes that Kirchner successfully extricated Argentina from near socio-economic collapse, whatever his other faults. Moreover, the division into 'good' and 'bad' populisms fosters the very Manicheanism on which populism thrives (albeit for this very reason Castañeda persuasively argues for the U.S. to develop a tolerant attitude to left-populists).

Conclusion

There is nothing new about left-populism. In fact, while populism can cleave to ideologies of both left and right, its emphasis on anti-elitism, democracy, and the representation

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of the excluded has made it a constant shadow of the left through various permutations and in various contexts. What is new is that contemporary developments allow the balance between populism and socialism to be recast. In the past, Marxism's insistence on class-consciousness, organization, and doctrine meant at best a populist sheen to tradi-

tional left approaches and strategies. Now, the decline of Marxism's dominance across the left has opened up the way to new approaches in which populism as an intrinsic component of contemporary democratic politics plays a large part. Populism has been a notable element of left party success across Europe: in particular we have noted the rise of left-populist parties that combine a radical left outlook with an inclusive anti-establishment emphasis as the *vox populi*. These parties trade on the real or alleged 'betrayal' of social democrats, present themselves as the real democratic socialists, and aim to address contemporary anti-globalization and anti-European insecurities just as does the populist right, although their critique is still addressed far more on socio-economic insecurities than ethnic or national ones.

This is by no means to say that left-populism is the only viable strategy for the contemporary left: the left-libertarian strategies of parties such as the Finnish Left Alliance are far less radical and populist. Moreover, the populist left in Western Europe is usually confined to an electoral niche by still-hegemonic social democratic parties, and when it has had a more dramatic electoral breakthrough it has been in the context of a crisis of

the mainstream social democratic party, although this is far less true of the East, where party systems are less stable and the socio-economic situation is far less benign. Nevertheless, there is as yet no European example of sustained left-populist electoral growth. Needless to say, left-populists will still have to contest anti-establishment votes with an established European populist right and have a weaker ability to articulate security and identity concerns.

In Latin America, populism has had a far more visible heritage than in Europe, although it has most usually been a nationalistic cross-class phenomenon with a leftist social policy than something exclusively of the left. Nevertheless, the contemporary political environment is much more propitious for the emergence of an electorally successful populist left in Latin America than in Europe: socio-economic inequality and disillusionment with neo-liberalism and U.S. policy is far greater, and the political infrastructure has always lent itself to more charismatic appeals and catch-all party stratagems that the post-Marxist left is now increasingly able to adopt. The natural result of this tendency is the emergence of left-populist leaders like Chávez and Morales who combine the economic nationalism and charisma of the classical populists with greater leftist rhetoric and opposition to neo-liberalism.⁵⁴ However, whilst the underlying structure of inequality and mass-mobilization makes the rise of the Latin American left probably long-lasting, and the political infrastructure means that the populist temptation will remain strong, there are other convincing reasons to believe that, as in Europe, left-populism will remain both a shadow and *in the shadow* of contemporary socialism for reasons both similar and different. As in Europe, the neo-liberal international system increases the taming effect on populist actors should they attain office: unlike in Europe, the moderate left in Latin America remains a relatively new and untainted phenomenon whose medium-term regional prospects look bright. Nevertheless, as in Europe now, should moderate left parties be associated with policy failure or absorption into the political establishment in the future, then we might fully expect new forms of left populist mobilization of a less moderate nature claiming to articulate the dashed hopes of the 'ordinary' people. Left-populism is here to stay.

Notes

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² For examples, see Canovan, Margaret. *Populism*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981; Taggart, Paul. *Populism*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000.

³ For just one example, see Betz, Hans-Georg, and Stefan Immerfall, eds. *The New Politics of the Right. Neo-Populist Parties and Movements in Established Democracies*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1998.

⁴ Mudde, Cas "The populist Zeitgeist." *Government & Opposition* 39(3) (2004): 541–563. This definition draws on that in Canovan (1981).

⁵ Wiles, Peter. "A Syndrome, Not a Doctrine: Some Elementary Theses on Populism." In Ionescu and Gellner (1969).

⁶ Fieschi, Catherine. "Introduction." *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9(3) (2004): 235–240; Mudde (1981).

⁷ Taggart (2000); Mudde (2004).

⁸ Taggart (2000); Weyland, Kurt. "Clarifying a Contested Concept. Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics." *Comparative Politics* 34(1) (2001): 1–22.

⁹ Ardit, Benjamin. "Populism, or, Politics At The Edges of Democracy." *Contemporary Politics* 9(1) (2003): 17–31.

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¹³ Laclau, Ernesto. *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*. London: New Left Books, 1977.

¹⁴ Mudde (2004).

¹⁵ For the problems of defining the contemporary left see for example March, Luke, and Cas Mudde. "What's left of the radical left? The European Radical Left after 1989: Decline and mutation." *Comparative European Politics* 3(1) (2005): 23–49.

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¹⁷ For example, Taggart, Paul. "New Populist Parties in Western Europe." *West European Politics* 18(1) (Jan 1995): 34–51.

¹⁸ Mény, Yves, and Yves Surel. "The Constitutive Ambiguity of Populism." In *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, edited by Yves Mény and Yves Surel, 1–21. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002.

¹⁹ See Marijnessen, Jan. *Enough! A Socialist Bites Back*. Rotterdam: Socialistische Partij, 1996.

²⁰ For example, see Socialist Party website <<http://international.sp.nl/goals/firstturnleft.stm>>.

²¹ Preston, M., and S. Peart. "Scotland: Five New Socialist MPS Sworn In." *Green Left Weekly* 14 (May 2003).

²² See Rogers, Nick. "Bitter Fruits of Personality Politics." *Weekly Worker* 629 (June 15 2006), available at <<http://www.cpgb.org.uk/worker/629/ssp.htm>>.

²³ Lloyd, John. "Left out." *Prospect* (October 2005): 21–23.

²⁴ Koss, Michael, and Dan Hough. "Between a rock and a many hard places—The PDS and government participation in the Eastern German Länder." *German Politics* 15(1) (March 2006): 73–98.

²⁵ See statement of SSP United Left at <<http://www.ssp-ul.org/statement.html>>, accessed 14 October 2006.

²⁶ See Labour Party website <<http://www.darbopartija.lt>>, accessed 14 October 2006.

²⁷ Green, Niall. "Lithuania: election sees low turnout, large gains for Labour Party." World Socialist Web Site <<http://www.wsws.org>>, 28 October 2004.

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⁴⁴ Canovan, Margaret. "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy." *Political Studies* 47(1) (1999): 2-16; Mudde (2004).

⁴⁵ Canovan (1999).

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