

INTERVIEW

Populist politics on the edge of liberalism: An interview with Benjamin Arditì

Tim Houwen

In the past two decades, populist movements have disrupted traditional politics in many Western democracies. Whereas these movements were usually treated as an anomaly vis-à-vis liberal democratic institutions, more recently, they are seen as a phenomenon that challenges our understanding of democracy. Benjamin Arditì has made a valuable contribution to the debate by characterizing populism as a spectral recurrence of democracy. He has developed his argument partly in response to Margaret Canovan's view on populism.

Canovan focuses on the theoretical dimension of democratic politics and suggests that we can understand modern democracy as an interplay between the redemptive and pragmatic side of politics. She argues that populism arises in the gap between them, primarily as a corrective of the excesses brought about by pragmatism. For Canovan, populism is a shadow that follows modern democracy as an internal possibility. Arditì has criticized Canovan's argument concerning the shadow. According to Arditì, the question is to determine how embedded this possibility is, and what it entails. Whereas Canovan argues that populism works as a cleansing operation that makes democracy vibrant again, Arditì claims that populism can be a phenomenon that both accompanies democracy and haunts it. Therefore, he suggests to refer to populism as a spectre rather than a shadow, since this metaphor addresses the undecidability that is inherent to populism.

Benjamin Arditì is one of the leading political theorists at the National University of Mexico (UNAM). His work is at the cutting edge of contemporary debates in politics, critical theory, philosophy and sociology. Arditì is the co-author of *Polemization* (1999) and co-editor of the series 'Taking on the Political' in the United Kingdom. In 2007 he published *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism: Difference, Populism, Revolution, Agitation* (Edinburgh University Press) in which he analyzes political and social phenomena that operate at what he terms 'the edges of liberalism'. Arditì claims that these edges can be thought of as the internal periphery of liberal democratic politics, 'an outside that belongs, but not properly so' (p. 3). Politics on the edge of liberalism is represented by a series of political phenomena – difference, revolution, agitation and populism – that challenge the hegemonic status of the liberal code in the West today. In a conversation with Tim Houwen, Arditì explains how populism inhabits these disputed corners of liberal democratic politics and talks about populism as 'a spectre of democracy'.

1. ‘Populism’ is a polemical notion. Politicians use the term as a political weapon to discredit their opponents in political debates, creating an opposition between ‘populist’ politicians who respond to gut feeling of the people and ‘reasonable’ politicians. The French philosopher Jacques Rancière concludes that ‘populism’ is really just a pejorative term. According to Rancière, agents use pejoratively the term ‘populism’ because it threatens their order. Would you agree with Rancière?

The short answer is yes. Rancière is probably right in saying that populism is a term of derision like democracy was amongst Plato and others. Open a newspaper in Mexico City, Caracas, Amsterdam or Rome and you will see how often the adjective is used to demean a practice, an utterance or a person. Conservatives in the United States tend to use ‘socialist’ as their word of choice to disqualify their liberal opponents, but liberals (in the peculiar US sense of the word) give credence to Rancière when they dismiss the Tea Party brethren of mainstream conservatism as populists.

Having said this, I have always been struck by the poetic and conceptual resonance of something Peter Worsley wrote in an article published over 40 years ago. Populism, he says, is a particularly slippery term of political discourse, but “since the word *has* been used, the existence of verbal smoke might well indicate a fire somewhere”. I think this is quite true. Rancière tells us something about this fire, or about a fire that also works as a smokescreen: populism is a convenient label whose effectiveness rests not on its conceptual precision but on the evocative force it acquires in polemical encounters. It is always our opponents who pander to popular sentiments for personal gain, seek to raise wages when they should balance the budget, pretend to care for those who suffer when they are just using them to advance their agenda, demand personal rather than institutional allegiance, and so on. These and similar sound bites dot the vocabulary of those who see populism as pure negativity. But fires have more than one flame, so in order to answer your question – and get extra mileage out of Worsley’s metaphor – I would say that political valence of populism involves something besides contempt for one’s adversaries.

We can characterize this something else in many ways. Margaret Canovan returns to her earlier work on populism in a seminal article that draws heavily from the posthumous work of Michael Oakshott in order to conceive populism as a phenomenon that emerges in the gap between the redemptive and pragmatic faces of democracy. Ernesto Laclau offers us a revamped theory of populism that draws from psychoanalysis and political theory. He assesses the literature on groups, leaders and the people and develops concept of a split demos by speaking of the *plebs* and the *populus* or impossible yet necessary fullness of community. He claims that the starting point of a populist challenge is a crisis understood as the growing incapacity of the institutional system to satisfy social demands. He also develops a simple account of populism based on empty signifiers, a ‘fully developed’ one through floating signifiers, proposes an equivalential link between the Lacanian *objet petit a*, catachresis and hegemony and extends this equivalence to

populism by saying that its construction of the people is always catachresical. Yet once the conceptual fireworks are over and you look at the architecture of his reasoning it is difficult to shake off the impression that his theory of populism is little more than a reenactment of his theory of hegemony by other means. You realize that for Laclau populism, politics and hegemony are siblings that share the same semantic space.

I myself have tried to qualify the elusive nature of populism by characterizing it as a spectral recurrence of democracy. This expression draws from the work of Jacques Derrida and I play on the double meaning of the specter as both a visitation and an ominous presence to propose three differentiated forms of appearance of populism. I first discuss populism as a fellow traveler of liberal democracy in the contemporary media-enhanced forms of representative government. The immediacy of the relationship between candidates and people – which is actually a semblance of immediacy, a virtual one that is mediated by television, internet and social networks – undermines the centrality of political parties in the electoral process and gives a better chance for outsiders to reach a wide spectrum of voters. The distance between populist and mainstream leaderships shrinks as one finds shared features such as their supra-institutional legitimacy and their status as political brokers and their impatience with the procedural aspects of the political process. In its second variant populism is something like the awkward guest of mainstream liberal democracy: it rides the wave of what Canovan would call redemptive politics even if it does so by sidestepping and sometimes disregarding the formalities of the political process. It mobilizes people and operates on the edges or rougher margins of what passes for the acceptable table manners of democratic politics. The third and final iteration of the phenomenon is antithetical to democracy, and reminds us that the unsavory aspects of populism that its critics never tire to expose – the appetite for messianic leadership, the perception of dissent as treason, a cavalier respect for the law and political freedoms, and so on. The actual guise of this specter of democracy is in principle undecidable as it can be a fellow traveler, an uncomfortable guest and a nemesis of democracy.

2. In your analyses populism is depicted as a phenomenon on the edge of liberalism or an internal periphery of liberalism. In your book *Politics on the edges of liberalism* you seem to confuse and/or substitute ‘liberalism’ and ‘(liberal) democracy’ sometimes. Does democracy and liberal democracy have the same meaning for you?

No, for me liberalism and democracy are quite distinct concepts and I hope the readers don't think that I use them as if they were interchangeable. When I was an undergraduate student I took a course with C. B. Macpherson, who for me is one of the brightest political theorists of the twentieth century. This course allowed me to learn very early in my career that the two components of the syntagm ‘liberal democracy’ are not linked together by a principle of necessity. Liberalism does not automatically lead to democracy and there is no reason to think that democracy requires liberalism as a matter of principle. Macpherson put it very well when he says that the liberal state had existed long before there was

such a thing as liberal democracy. The democratization of liberalism, wherever this occurred, was a purely contingent outcome and not a natural consequence of the liberal state. A non-liberal democracy is therefore within the realm of the possible, although in the 1960s Macpherson was unable to cite any example. The point is that the confusion of liberalism and democracy is illegitimate.

In the chapters on populism in *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism* I underline the contingency of the links between liberalism and democracy and outline some of the populist challenges to the liberal component of the syntagm. I also oppose the banal reduction of democracy to its liberal format by speaking of a politics on the edges, the concept that serves as the title of my book. The purpose of the concept is to question the belief that democratic politics today is clearly liberal. Clarity, however, is precisely what we don't have. My analogical model for a politics on the edges is Freud's characterization of the symptom – particularly as it appears in his later writings – as the return of the repressed. We usually think of a 'return' in term of the boomerang-like trajectory of something that goes away and then comes back. But the repressed – a traumatic event, a particularly painful memory – never leaves the unconscious because it has nowhere else to dwell. The ego, however, lives the repression of traumatic memories or experiences as if they had actually gone away. Freud describes this paradoxical departure that goes nowhere with the help of the oxymoron 'internal foreign territory'. The beauty of this metaphor is that it denotes something that belongs, but not properly so. I draw from this to think of a gray zone of phenomena whose belonging to the liberal tradition is a matter of dispute. A 'politics on the edges' is one whose location within or outside the liberal framework (or any other framework you wish to study) is undecidable and therefore cannot be elucidated outside the framework of what Rancière calls a disagreement.

So, whether you look at it from the perspective of my arguments on populism or the concept of a politics on the edges of liberalism, I do the extra mile to avoid conflating liberalism and democracy. Nothing guarantees that I succeed in generating this impression; having no control over how a text will be read, one can only hope that readers will see it this way.

3. You suggest to refer to populism as a 'spectre of democracy', which means 'accepting the undecidability between the democratic aspect of the phenomenon and its possible ominous tones'. What does this undecidability precisely mean? Is it a mere plurality of perspectives? Or does it mean that it is intrinsically undecidable what populism is and to which extent it is good or bad? If the latter is the case, why is it intrinsically undecidable?

The term 'undecidability' was coined by Jacques Derrida in *Force of Law: the mystical foundation of authority*. It has at least two meanings. It can be seen as the oscillation between two decisions or norms, like when we debate whether to order pizza or Chinese food or when a judge tries to figure out whether the case under review should be tried as homicide or manslaughter. When you ask me if undecidability means a plurality of perspectives you are alluding to this sense of the word.

Derrida, however, is more interested in undecidability as a way of dealing with the aporia of justice, with the possibility of justice as an event that escapes the bounds of any code or system of rules. His reasoning is as follows. If a judge simply *follows* or *applies* a rule there can be no justice because then the code would make the decision, not the judge. He would be relieved from the responsibility of coming up with an ethical or fresh decision capable of doing justice to the uniqueness of the case at hand. This happens, for example, when you invoke the injunction 'thou shall not kill' to denounce a killer without pausing to assess whether the killing was accidental or in self-defense. A just or responsible decision, says Derrida, requires a margin of indifference toward the norm. One cannot do justice simply by applying a general norm to a singular case, for then one would be doing harm to the singularity of the case at hand. More precisely, one does invoke the law, but one cannot derive justice from the law or norms pure and simple because this suspends the 'eventness' of justice. The problem is that if one *suspends* the norm altogether there can be no justice either; the very possibility of justice would be cancelled by the arbitrariness of a personal judgment that rests on nothing outside itself.

Two things follow from this. One is that as a crucible of justice, undecidability consists of facing the challenge of finding a passageway between a general norm and a singular case. Not any passageway but one that was not discernible until then or was never used before in this precise manner. Undecidability has to do with what you do in the gap that appears between following and suspending the law: it means coming up with a fresh judgment to negotiate that gap. The other consequence is that despite his references to law and justice Derrida is proposing a theory of how one decides in the face of singular, irreplaceable situations. The scope of cases ranges from something as harrowing as Abraham's predicament – whether to follow God's command and sacrifice Isaac or give up his faith in order to save his son – to less spectacular decisions like those concerning how to proceed in a case of plagiarism or what is the appropriate punishment for children who misbehave.

My use of undecidability vis-à-vis the interface between populism and democracy draws from Derrida's. People rush to judgment when they denounce the proto-messianic status of populist leaders or their penchant for confrontational street actions as unmistakable signs of the weakening of institutions, the erosion of the rule of law or the emptying of democratic processes. We may suspect that this can and will happen by drawing from experience, but suspicion is based on circumstantial evidence and makes a firm conclusion illegitimate. Put differently, the democratic or authoritarian valence of a populist challenge cannot be ascertained by simply and mechanically applying a set of criteria of what populism is and deriving from this a set of consequences that will follow necessarily. This is because the connection between criteria and consequences is in principle undecidable. I emphasize this point not to shield populism from its critics or to say that it is always democratic (it is not) but to counteract the argument about the

inevitability of causal connection between the phenomenon and authoritarian political performances.

4. Despite its elusiveness, populism does have specific features according to you: modes of representation, symptom of democratic politics, and the underside of democracy. In one regard, populism is a mode of representation (direct access and interpellation of ‘the people’ by a charismatic leader), whose conditions are made possible by the media. What is the role of the media here? Does the personalization of politics mean that populism is ‘here to stay’?

I speak of three modes of appearance of populism but concede that other people writing about populism might find more, or less, or that there are indeed three iterations of the phenomenon but their features differ from the ones I identify, or that they will see populism in a very different way. My intent is simply to call into question the a priori belief in an unbridgeable gap between populism and democracy and present their connections as a more common occurrence than we previously thought.

But to say that populism is here to stay is an imprecise statement. It doesn't tell us if it will remain with us as a fellow traveler of media-enhanced political performances in present-day liberal democracies, as a symptom of democratic politics that operates on the edges of liberalism, or as the underside and nemesis of democratic politics. The point is that when many features previously associated with populism become commonplace in mainstream liberal democratic settings it is harder to hold on to the older assumptions that render populism an anti-democratic political performance by default.

Today it is more difficult to speak of a relationship of pure and simple exteriority between populism and representative politics, if only because the mass media makes it easier for many political actors to bypass some of the functions of political parties to reach a wider audience. One should also reassess Hanna Pitkin's celebrated claim that political representation consists of ‘acting for others’, an expression she uses to specify the action involved in representation and to differentiate it from the ‘standing for’ that defines symbolic representation and the Hobbesian view of representation as authorization which entails a complete disappearance of the represented. Media-enhanced political performances blur the neatness of Pitkin's characterization of representation, and so does the growing personalization of political representation at a time when the speed of change reduces the shelf life of party platforms and campaign promises dramatically. I suspect that populism is changing the nature of representation to such an extent that we should now conceive it as an intertwinement of acting for others, the symbolic ‘standing for’ (the belief in the virtues of a leader who claims to incarnate the will of the people) and Hobbesian authorization (personalization of political options and trust for the leader).

The media will continue to play a large role in politics, but so will society to counter its unmitigated influence. The case of the now defunct British tabloid *News of*

the World is quite instructive. At 2 million copies per issue it boasted the largest circulation of any newspaper in the United Kingdom, but its downfall is largely due to having had to confront its own fantasy that success could trump accountability. More precisely, its downfall falsifies its parent company's assumption that things like hacking phones, bribing police officers, harassing celebrities and showing bad taste are OK as long as the newspaper could sell enough copies to cower politicians into acquiescence. This will not put an end to the influence of the media on politics but it will prompt legislators to introduce more stringent controls on it. Perhaps something similar but less dramatic is happening already at Fox News in the United States, another outlet of Rupert Murdoch's media conglomerate that operates as the mouthpiece of the worst strains of right wing politics. One of its 'infotainers', Glenn Beck, endeared himself to the most reactionary segment of the public by presenting outlandish claims – among them, that there was a vast Islamic and socialist conspiracy to rule the world or at any rate harm the US – as if they were true without providing the slightest shred of evidence. The network recently let go of Mr. Beck when his flight from reality became so over the top for his viewers that his ratings started to fall. Beck had turned into a liability for the business as well as for the advancement of the right wing agenda of Fox News in the 2012 presidential elections. We can thus paraphrase Marx and say that the media often rules in politics, but not always as it pleases.

5. But populism is also a symptom of democratic politics. Here, populism seems to be described as a phenomenon that recurs (intermittently) in modern representative democracies. Why is populism a recurrent phenomenon of representative democracy? And why is it there often intermittently? Why does it often vanish from the scene of democracy after a while?

I am not sure that there is or could be a conceptual answer to this question. What you are asking is a matter of practical reason. To say that populism is a recurrent phenomenon is a descriptive statement; to ask *why* this is so is more of a metaphysical one. The same holds for the intermittence of populism. To address these two questions one would have to invoke some kind of ontology of politics, populism or democracy. In order to avoid moving in this direction I would ask things like what made it possible for Carlos Menem to hijack Peronism and put it to the service of a neoliberal project during his administration, effectively neutralizing its social sensibility, or how was it that the Peronist movement made amends with its historical concern for the poor and the excluded under the presidencies of Nestor Kirchner and Cristina Fernandez.

6. Populism is, finally, depicted as an underside of democracy. Populism appears thus both in its democratic and undemocratic variants. Which is the criterion to distinguish between the two? Does liberal democracy have a core?

There are two questions here. One has to do with the core. The other refers to ways of distinguishing between democratic and non-democratic incarnations of populism.

Let me begin by saying something about the core. In the introduction to my book I pose a rhetorical question: if one speaks of a politics on the edges of liberalism, does this mean that there is also a core or normal region of liberal politics? I argued that there is, and outlined some of its defining traits. But immediately after doing so I questioned its purity by saying that the core of liberal democracy, like that of any other political imaginary, is exposed to contamination through its confrontations with its multiple others. Contamination also appears when you draw from a sort of collective political jurisprudence of sorts and share many traits with other political traditions. Hence the impossibility of thinking of a core that is not always already a hybrid of sorts. Yet I also questioned hybridity as a facile, convenient and therefore rather useless answer to the question of whether an edge presupposes a core. So I explored other options. One is to appeal to the metaphor of space and its twin concepts of proximity and distance. I found this quite useless too because there is no satisfactory way of measuring political and conceptual distance. The old theories of dependency invoked distance when speaking of a prosperous imperial center in the North feeding off the poor underdeveloped periphery in the South of the planet. Those who advocated the various strands of dependency theory had the good taste to limit their theoretical aims by conceiving distance as geography and not conceptual differentiation. You could also appeal to a criterion of intensity, but this criterion is subsidiary to the spatial metaphor and is burdened by the notoriously difficult task of measuring intensity. In the case we are examining, this would mean measuring the degree of belonging to the liberal core.

This is where the idea of an internal periphery comes into play. In my response to question two I mentioned that this oxymoron draws from another oxymoron, Freud's 'internal foreign territory', which he uses to depict the symptom as the return of the repressed. The play between the internal and the foreign in Freud's expression generates a gray zone of phenomena whose interiority is not *properly* internal. Since what is proper is subject to interpretation, we are led to invoke Rancière's notion of disagreement to try to elucidate the status of a given phenomenon or practice vis-à-vis liberalism —a point that applies also to the question of what is properly internal to populism, anarchism and so on.

We can now move to the second part of your question concerning criteria for distinguishing between democratic and authoritarian populism. In my book I mention a series of signs that set off alarm bells for democrats. Let me quote the relevant passage: "[T]he cult of personality can transform leaders into quasi-messianic figures for whom accountability is not a relevant issue, and the populist disregard for institutional checks and balances can encourage rule by decree and all sorts of authoritarian behavior while maintaining a democratic façade. The Manichean distinction between good common people and corrupt elites can become an alibi for using strong-arm tactics against political adversaries, and the continual invocation of the unity of the people can be used as means to dispel pluralism and toleration" (p. 93). I develop this point further by looking at Claude Lefort's warnings about the populist fantasy of the People as one, their tendency

to pose a vertical relationship between generous leaders and grateful masses, and so on. When the bulk of a populist practice is framed by this kind of criteria, then it ceases to be a fellow traveler or a symptom of democracy and begins to morph into its nemesis.

I am quite comfortable with this argument. I am also aware that some might conclude from this that I am claiming that populism is intrinsically or at least *prima facie* democratic, something I mentioned in *passim* earlier on. If this were the case, we would have to conclude that authoritarianism is a deviation from the democratic spirit of populism. But it would be a wrong conclusion, an essentialist view that is quite contrary to what I propose in my book. So how could we avoid this conclusion? Here I must refer again to Macpherson. When I answered your second question I endorsed his claim that liberalism and democracy can cohabitate in the expression 'liberal democracy'. I also said that the cozy relationship between one and the other does not mean that there is a necessary connection between them. We can apply the same reasoning to the relationship between populism and democracy: it is the result of a political articulation, not of something immanent in either of these terms. This allows us to maintain that, contrary to conventional accounts of populism, there is no necessary divorce between populism and democratic politics. It also preempts the charge that true populism is always democratic and that its authoritarian variants are simply degenerations of that core.

7. Finally, you describe populism as a symptom and a dangerous underside of modern representative democracy. Does that mean that populism only exists in modern democratic regimes?

I don't think so. I obviously question the relation of pure and simple exteriority between populism and democracy and reformulate Canovan's argument about populism as the shadow of democracy, but this does not mean that I am confining populism to modern democratic regimes.

Modern democracy as we have known it for the past century and a half is grounded in territorial representation, political parties, elections and electoral citizenship. When workers, women, immigrants and the illiterate embarked in struggles for democratic rights they were demanding the right to vote and to be voted. This makes actually existing democracy a typically modern construct that has very little in common with its Greek forerunner except for the name and the etymology of the word. Populism does occur in this modern setting. But it also takes place in others. In an earlier article ("The becoming-other of politics: a post-liberal archipelago", 2003) I characterized present-day politics as post-liberal and proposed an image of thought for this setting. I depicted it as an archipelago whose three 'islands' or political stages – of electoral representation, social empowerment through non-electoral citizenship and of supranational exchanges among actors that included nation-states but also others located above and below the governmental level. Modes of engagement, forms of organization and strategic objectives that occur alongside the electoral process are commonplace and give cre-

dence to my claim that post-liberalism is already here and not waiting in a distant future. Venezuela has been experimenting with post-liberal forms of political participation, first through the *Círculos Bolivarianos* and later on through the *Consejos Comunales*, both of which fall outside the liberal mould of elections and representation. Yet the literature on Venezuela usually describes president Hugo Chavez as a standard-bearer of populism. So populism as a specter of democracy applies both to liberal democratic settings and to those that are not liberal democratic in the strict sense of the word.

This refers to the present and to the process of our becoming-other – our ongoing move towards post-liberal polities. How about the past, i.e., the time prior to the democratization of the liberal state? I am not sure how far back in time we can push populism. But we do know that it predates the advent of modern democracies. The literature often mentions the *Narodniks* in nineteenth century Russia and the body of ideas and actions known as *narodnichestvo* as an example of peasant-based populism. All this occurred in a semi-feudal order that had no traces of democracy, liberal or otherwise. The rise of General Georges Boulanger is also illustrative. Nineteenth century France was an industrializing nation with a liberal state, but there is no evidence to suggest that it was also democratic in the standard academic sense of a widely extended right to vote – women were not citizens of the Republic. Yet the literature nonetheless refers to *Boulangisme* as an example of populism. Finally, many see the seeds of modern populism in the mid-nineteenth century variant of Caesarism that Marx described as Bonapartism in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. By this he meant a situation where the contending forces cannot defeat one another and a broker with supra-partisan legitimacy appears as a way to avert catastrophe, usually but not necessarily through authoritarian rule. The conclusion, then, is that populism predates modern liberal democracy.