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RESEARCH ARTICLE / ÉTUDE ORIGINALE

On Populists and Demagogues

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Abstract
The article seeks to understand what is specifically modern about populists, why we have difficulty in agreeing on who and what they are, and—importantly—how we can address the formidable challenge they present to contemporary democratic politics. It does so by detailing the classical conception of the demagogue and by showing how modernity, in its liberal and counter-liberal aspects, sought to solve conclusively the problem of the demagogue. It argues that modern populists face significant obstacles to their ambitions in the form of modern constitutionalism, yet are also armed with new weapons, including new concepts or "ideologies" for manipulation (such as "the people," nation, race and class) and new rhetorical techniques (such as propaganda that exploits modern technology and mass media).

Résumé
L'article cherche à comprendre ce qui est spécifiquement moderne chez les populistes, pourquoi nous avons du mal à nous accorder sur qui et ce qu'ils sont, et surtout comment nous pouvons relever le formidable défi qu'ils représentent pour la politique démocratique contemporaine. Il le fait en détaillant la conception classique du démagogue et comment la modernité dans ses aspects libéraux et antilibéraux a cherché à résoudre de manière concluante le problème du démagogue. Il soutient que les populistes modernes font face à des obstacles importants à leurs ambitions sous la forme d'un constitutionnalisme moderne, mais qu'ils disposent également de nouvelles armes, y compris de nouveaux concepts ou « idéologies » de manipulation (invoquant "le peuple", la nation, la race, la classe sociale) et de nouveaux artifices rhétoriques comme la propagande qui exploite la technologie moderne et les médias de masse.

Keywords: populist; populism; demagogue; liberalism; rhetoric; ideology

Who is the modern populist? *Populist*, from *populus*, or people, is a Latin version of the Greek *demagogue*. Yet the term itself is of recent origin, coined in America in the nineteenth century.[1] If populist is a modern replacement of the classical demagogue, it seems to be a recent attempt to capture something new about the modern demagogue.[2] But what is specifically "modern" about the populist? Though the

term is used frequently in contemporary politics, the scholarship on populists yields, even by the standards of a contested concept, a remarkable complexity and diversity in approaches. For some, a populist is a "personalist" or "charismatic" leader who seeks and gains unmediated authority from the people.[3] For others, populist refers not to a person but essentially to a type of rhetoric or form of communication.[4] Much of the scholarship, in fact, shifts—often imperceptibly—from populist leaders to "populism."[5] In doing so, however, it concedes an inability to define what populism actually means,[6] with the suggestion that, at best, it is a "thin ideology."[7]

In this article, I attempt to answer the question of who is the modern populist, why we have difficulty in agreeing on who and what are populists, and—importantly—how we can address the formidable challenge populists present to contemporary democratic politics.[8] The core argument is that, in important respects, the modern populist is comparable to the classical demagogue, who was regarded as an individual who seeks to aggrandize himself by deploying a distinct and divisive rhetoric to exploit weaknesses in those regimes where the people are sovereign. Yet the modern populist is distinguished in two decisive respects from the demagogue. The first is that populists face more considerable institutional obstacles to their ambitions, in the form of the rule of law and constitutionalism. This is because the liberal trajectory in modernity sought to solve the problem of the demagogue by instituting the modern state founded on social contract and constitutionalism, which was intended to curb the demagogue's ambitions. The second is that, in other respects, the populist is more powerful than the demagogue. Though attempting to limit the demagogue—and thereby inventing the populist—modernity in its counter-liberal aspect armed the populist with new rhetorical weapons. These include new concepts or "ideologies" for manipulation (*das Volk*, *peuple* or people; elites; nation; race; class) and new rhetorical techniques, such as propaganda derived from modern technology and mass media.

In the discussion that follows, I first outline the way the demagogue was understood in classical political thought, noting in particular the specific measures that were advocated for counteracting what was seen to be the pernicious force of the demagogue in democratic politics. I then explore how in early modernity, the demagogue, who could now rely on revealed religion, posed a new challenge, and how liberalism countered the false prophet with the new institutional solutions of the modern state and constitutionalism, at the same time that a counter-liberalism armed the new demagogue or populist with novel rhetorical means to pursue their ambitions. In the final section, I examine how modernity in both its liberal and counter-liberal aspects has contributed to our inability to see the nature of the populist more clearly, especially in its moral dimension, accounting for the diverse approaches adopted in the contemporary scholarship on populists. I then detail the two distinctive features of populists that make them both more constrained and more powerful than classical demagogues.

The Classical Demagogue

A *dēmagōgos* (demagogue) was, for the ancient Greeks, an *agos* (leader) of the *dēmos* (the common people; the many), while a *dēmēgoros* was one who speaks

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before the public assembly (*agoreuō*). In classical democratic practice, these terms were not pejorative or condemnatory; they only assumed this aspect when classical political thought, especially that of Plato, and subsequently of Aristotle and Plutarch, defined a demagogue as someone who, driven by self-advantage and wealth, seeks political power by flattering the people and pandering to them.[9] In doing so, these philosophers were attempting to understand and address a new democratic phenomenon that had already been noted by poets and historians: the rise of exceptional individuals such as Cleon, the wealthy Athenian who became general after Pericles's death and who was notorious for using inflammatory speeches and buffoonery to encourage the greed and audacity of the Athenians in the Peloponnesian wars.[10] Cleon, according to Thucydides, convinced the Athenians to put to death the men of Mytilene (a city on the island of Lesbos that had revolted from Athens), a decision they repudiated the next day.[11]

Classical political thought saw the demagogue as someone from the *demos*, or the many poor, though he could also be an oligarch who "played the demagogue" or appealed to the people to gain advantage in oligarchic rivalry.[12] The demagogue was therefore distinguished from the *politikos*, or statesman, who possessed political virtue and knowledge and who pursued the common good or advantage through public policy defended by persuasive speech or rhetoric that moderated rather than excited the envy, fear and hopes of the many.[13] The demagogue was also distinguished, at least initially, from the *tyrannos*, or tyrant, who sought to rule for their own advantage by overturning democracy, though to the extent that some demagogues encouraged the decrees of the people to override the laws, they secretly aspired to be tyrants.[14] Thus the classical political understanding of the demagogue, by focusing on the leadership of the people and emphasizing the rhetoric or public speaking that has such a pre-eminent role in democracies, attempted to reveal the crucial link between the demagogue and democracy, the regime founded on the rule by the many. It is instructive to examine this classical understanding of regime because it is in the larger context of regimes and the dynamic struggles between their different principles that the demagogue makes an appearance; it also helps us to see how this approach differs so profoundly from that of the modern state, which was one of the major innovations liberalism initiated to restrain the demagogue.

Classical political thought understood the demagogue in the context of the *politeia*, or regime—the authoritative arrangement of offices that not only accounted for the organization or structure of institutions but also, more fundamentally, revealed the aspirations or goals of each political community. In classical thought, each regime aimed not only at the necessary aspects of all political organizations, including material prosperity and security, but was also animated at its core by a higher conception of the good. Regimes were therefore much more than contractual arrangements between citizens but indeed defined, and therefore were evaluated by, their views of the noble or complete life. These notions of the noble or good life included a life of virtue, honour, wealth or freedom, so that regimes were defined as aristocratic, timocratic, oligarchic or democratic.[15] The character of the regime was evident, above all, in the nature of those who held highest office, as well as in the practices and institutions they defended. But it was usually in cases of regime change or revolution, when a regime shifted from one conception of the noble life

to another, that its nature was most visible. These changes took place because there was a tendency for all regimes to insist on and promote their core principle and therefore exclude or disenfranchise other ideals, leading to instability and—potentially—*stasis*, or revolution.

Although there was a diverse range of regimes, classical thought saw the predominant struggle in all *politeiai* as one between the rich few and the many poor, so that most regimes were animated and defined by the constant struggle between democrats and oligarchs.[16] This conception of regimes accounted for the practical political solutions offered by classical thinkers on how to moderate and stabilize regimes, especially by countering the impulse of all regimes to become more extreme by asserting their principles to the exclusion of others. The classical proposals therefore included instituting the rule of law and the mixed regime that would combine oligarchic and democratic offices to accommodate the concerns of each and thereby make room for those in the middle, who would moderate the struggle between the rich and the poor. These solutions were also intended to provide room in ruling offices for those who sought not just the partial good but the good of the city as a whole. The distinction between just regimes, which aimed at the common good, and corrupt regimes, which pursued the interest of a part, was intended to educate all in the idea of a good that transcended any specific interests one may have in the *polis*.[17]

In classical thought, the demagogue, as noted above, is someone who is a leader or defender of the *demos*, or the people. The democratic principle, based on the equality of all citizens, meant a much broader franchise and therefore a regime that was more stable than an oligarchy, which in asserting its principle of merit measured by wealth, inevitably limited the range and scope of citizenship and concentrated authoritative offices in the hands of a few families. Yet, like all regimes, democracy tended to assert its foundational principle of equality in ever increasing and comprehensive ways. The expansion of equality, to the extent that it broadens access to authoritative offices, would seemingly support a regime's stability and therefore not be a weakness. But in seeing all inequality, including differences based on wealth, virtue and talent as fundamentally unjust, democratic regimes revealed a powerful egalitarian impulse vulnerable to exploitation by demagogues.[18] The envy and resentment born of this democratic sense of unjust inequality and the fear that democracy was ever subject to oligarchic subversion were passions exploited by the demagogue—apparently to defend the regime but, in fact, for personal advantage and aggrandizement. The demagogue would use the lifeblood of all democracies—public speaking and persuasive speech or rhetoric—to show how he was the great defender of the people and democracy against those who threatened the regime by moving it toward oligarchic principles or, worse, by treacherously depriving the people of their freedom by supporting foreign powers. In attacking the rich and well born, the demagogue exploited democratic envy and resentment of any inequality to promise redistribution of wealth, becoming the hero and leader of the people—a champion of the downtrodden who now had someone to defend and benefit them. The people were willing to give as much authority as possible to the demagogue to allow the prosecution of a cause in the name of the people, but in doing so, they did not realize that they were undermining the regime itself. The ambitious and articulate demagogue was therefore able to alter the democratic

regime not by force but by personal accumulation of authoritative offices, resulting in due course in the overthrow of the regime and the institution of the rule by one for the demagogue's own benefit, also known as tyranny.[19]

The classical attempt to counter this weakness of democracy took a number of forms, such as the polity (or mixed regime) and the rule of law, in addition to those noted above. More specifically, classical political philosophers sought to educate the talented few who had political ambitions to pursue the public good rather than tyranny. The education of the statesman and potential philosopher was therefore the major theme for classical political thought.[20] A second theme was the education of the democratic public, so that people would be able to distinguish between statesman and the demagogue. The introduction of this distinction, the extensive writings on sophistry, and the analysis of the new art of rhetoric that sought to show the techniques of persuasion founded on ethos, logos and pathos were all instituted precisely for the purpose of teaching the public how to recognize demagogues and thereby undermine the beguiling force of their powerful rhetoric.[21] Classical political thought therefore sought to ameliorate rather than extirpate the weaknesses of democracy through moderation of regimes and democratic education in rhetoric and justice.

Modernity and the Problem of the Demagogue

Is the populist a demagogue "by another name"? It would seem that the demagogue has now been replaced in contemporary political studies by the populist.[22] But in what way is the populist different from the demagogue? Does the populist address a fundamentally different phenomenon? In the discussion that follows, I will argue that modernity, in its liberal aspect, sought to solve conclusively the problem of the demagogue by replacing the classical regime with the modern neutral state. But this attempt proved to be a mixed success, giving rise to the new demagogue, or populist. As I will show, the demagogue is in important respects similar to the populist, but there are also important differences between the two. The populist is more constrained than the classical demagogue, especially by modern liberal innovations such as constitutionalism and the larger state. But the populist is also now better armed, with new conceptions of the "people" and new rhetorical means in the form of propaganda. To see this second aspect more clearly, we need to note the two broad distinctions in modern thought that are consequential for populism—its liberal trajectory, and those aspects that were opposed to it. As we will see, the liberal aspect of modernity sought to do away altogether with the problem of the demagogue by denying any distinction between statesman and demagogue and then by caging both within legal and institutional structures that would curb and exploit individual ambitions for the common advantage. Those aspects of modernity that challenged liberalism, as we note in the next section, retained important features of liberal thought but, in contesting liberalism, in effect rearmed the demagogue as the modern populist with the new language and weapons of modernity.

To understand why liberal modernity needed to confront and solve the problem of the demagogue, it is necessary to start with the seemingly new challenge that revealed religion presented to the classical solution to the problem of the demagogue. The relationship between classical thought and the Abrahamic religions—

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especially the way that Judaism, Christianity and Islam appropriated aspects of classical thought and the extent to which modern theology owes its origins to such philosophy—is a deep and complex question.[23] What is clear, however, is that the distinction between sacred and secular, and the intrusion of theological concepts and divine mandate into political debates, posed a profound new challenge to political authority. Demagogues could now use the language of theology, including the concepts of sin, divine punishment and redemption, as well as the new rhetorical forms, such as prophecy, sermons and edicts, to question and even override the authority of secular rulers. This new manifestation of the "false prophet" therefore questioned the truth and relevance of the classical insights into politics altogether.[24] Consequently we find in early modernity not only a direct attempt to confront and limit the role of piety in politics but also a wholesale repudiation of major aspects of classical thought due to its perceived complicity in the new pious politics. We can see this clearly in Machiavelli's *The Prince*, where he announces that he will "depart from the order of others," going to the "effectual truth" rather than "imagined republics and principalities," to advise princes "to learn to be able not to be good, and to use this and not use it according to necessity."[25] The new approach was founded on a realism that eschewed revelation in the name of reason. As a result, modern thinkers radically questioned the classical concept of the regime and the ambition to moderate the excesses of political instability through mixed regimes and education in virtue. Their clear-eyed assessment of the limits of virtue and justice in politics allowed them to attack classical hopefulness, even utopianism.

Yet this repudiation permitted modern thinkers to entertain much greater hopes for the efficacy of their political insights and proposed institutional solutions. An instructive example is Thomas Hobbes, who is so consequential for our discussion because of his influential ideas of power, the social contract and the modern state.[26] Hobbes regards the glory-seekers and the ambitious, those who desire office or precedence, as one of the major causes of political instability and war (*Lev.* VI, 123; *Lev.* XIII, 185). "Popularity of potent Subject (unlesse the Common-wealth has a very good caution of his fidelity,) is a dangerous Disease," according to Hobbes, "because the people (which should receive their motion from the Authority of the Sovereign,) by the flattery, and by the reputation of an ambitious man, are drawn from obedience to the Lawes, to follow a man, of whose virtues, and designes they have no knowledge" (*Lev.* IXXX, 374). Such individuals become especially dangerous, according to Hobbes, when they claim divine authority and exploit religious fears to achieve their ambitions.[27] The solution Hobbes proposes is radical; indeed, he claims that he is the first political scientist who has solved the problem of politics and secured the basis for "peace everlasting," provided his ideas are implemented.[28] He sought to do so by repudiating classical political thought and its new theological admixture, scholasticism. Hobbes argues that the absence of a *summum bonum*, or an ultimate good, combined with the human desire to seek power to satisfy indeterminate future desires, results in competition and contention, and ultimately a state of war. The solution to this perennial and foundational problem of conflict is a legal contract where all agree on what is *summum malum*, namely fear of violent death, bringing into existence a new entity, the "state," as an artificial god to enforce the original contract of peace. Hobbes's new politics, founded on the desirability of peace rather than the contradictory and irreconcilable

claims over what is a good life, was intended to disable the demagogue and potential tyrant. In doing so, however, he denies any difference between statesman and demagogue because his concept of power assumes all seek power and therefore cannot be criticized for doing so—"Desires, and other Passions of man," according to Hobbes, "are in themselves no sin" (*Lev.* XIII, 187). Moreover, Hobbes's new conception of the state disengages the demagogue from its original link with democracy because the state is now conceived as a neutral executive architecture designed to secure the agreed-upon goals of security and prosperity by ousting the destabilizing and deadly debates over justice of regimes. From now on, only the state is legitimate and incidentally, because it is founded on the rights of nature of each individual, only the state as contract (and not *patria* as "land") is legitimate, denying the demagogue the ability to use patriotism or the welfare and prosperity of the people as the basis for rhetorical claims. Finally, all who challenge the state, especially those who use revealed religion, are defined by Hobbes as proud or vainglorious, a form of madness.[29] Consequently, the artificial god of the Leviathan state does away with the proud and ambitious—those who would exploit the people's fear of divine punishment to satisfy their personal desire for power—by instituting a machinery of state that is enforced by the actions of the contracting parties who, in pursing their private lives, also reinforce and protect the workings of the state. We therefore find at the origins of the modern state a radically new basis for political stability that has, as an important part of its strategy, a concerted attack on the demagogue. This approach was subsequently taken up and refined by other liberal thinkers, who introduced new features, including representative democracy, separation of powers and federalism, to limit and fragment power and thereby direct the ambitions of the demagogue into more salutary channels.[30] The liberal trajectory of modernity can therefore be seen as a direct assault on the demagogue—not on the classical basis of an education that distinguishes between statesman and demagogue and instructs in the art of rhetoric, or moderates the struggle between the few and the many by means of the polity, but on the basis of a new institutional solution that channels individual ambition for the common advantage. The intention, it would seem, is to exploit the energy and ambition of the demagogues and, in doing so, conclusively remedy the danger they posed.[31]

Challenges to Liberal Modernity

The liberal movement in modernity confronted a number of profound challenges, from traditional or conservative sources, as well as from those who endorsed its modern premises but sought to repair or correct its deficiencies.[32] How these different approaches conceptualized and sought to ameliorate the challenge of the demagogue is an important question that has yet to receive the attention it warrants. In this context, we will focus on the historical turn in modernity initiated by Hegel and on the subsequent movements both on the "Left" and the "Right," because these redefined the nature of political debates and, in so doing, provided new opportunities to the modern demagogues or populists. Both the Left and the Right continued to accept the liberal premises: for example, the modern concept of the "individual" and progress. But, in important respects, they liberated the demagogue and provided a new rhetorical armoury.

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Perhaps the major difference between the Left and Right was the different role of individual leadership within their philosophical architecture. Hegel's "Spirit," as transformed by Marx into dialectical materialism, accorded primacy to transcendent causes, so that the role of any one individual (and therefore of the populist) became questionable: for example, consider Hegel's claim that if not Napoleon had not existed, someone else would have taken his place, as well as the problem of the individual in Marxism, evident in the concept of the "vanguard of the revolution."[33] On the Right, we find a greater scope for individual agency albeit in a supra-political aspect, with an emphasis on the creative individual who, in gathering in himself the forces of fate and history, can stand above morality to redefine the "tablet of values" as Nietzsche puts it.[34]

In addition to this difference, there was the importance to be attributed to ideas. The need to theorize the character of dialectical materialism, and especially to account for class consciousness, resulted in the introduction of "ideology" and false consciousness into the political lexicon, justifying the populist on the Left who could now exploit the new language of modern science to pursue his personal cause in the name of a larger historical mission. Marx's "class struggle" and the need for the working class to overthrow the bourgeoisie provided scientific proof of the arguments previously exploited by demagogues against the rich. On the Right—by drawing on Rousseau's defence of the fundamental equality and natural goodness of man and his celebration of the infallible "General Will," on Herder's emphasis on language for defining a people, and on Hegel's insights into recognition of the "Other," as well as on the newly emergent concept of the "nation" and therefore nationalism—a new conception of the "people," one derived from categories based on language, soil, race and blood, came to redefine the older political understanding of *demos*. The people were no longer "the many"; they were now a new entity with a noble mythical and metaphysical genealogy that justified grand ambitions—and sacrifices. This new rhetorical trope had the added advantage of being true by simple assertion, without the burdensome duties of persuasion imposed on demagogues by the old language of judgment, justice and common good. History and class were scientifically true, just as *das Volk* and *Heimat* were self-evident and incontrovertible to all who belonged. Finally, for both the Left and the Right, the modern state with its size, territorial sovereignty and technological achievements permitted a new and powerful tool for the populist. Though the size of the modern state seemed to be a fatal limitation on demagogic speech, technological advances made possible a new intimacy with the people, while the concentrated resources of the state made possible propaganda, the new powerful weapon in the arsenal of the populist.[35]

Populist as New Demagogue

We are now in a position to see if our examination of the populist and the demagogue has brought us any closer to answering our initial question of who is the modern populist. As we have noted, the demagogue, in classical thought, is a leader of the common people, or the many—someone who exploited factional differences between the few and the many, and especially between the rich and poor, by using speech that fed rather than moderated public fear, envy and indignation, all for

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personal advantage and, in the extreme case, to overthrow democracy for personal rule. This classical approach to understanding the demagogue is especially illuminating because it reveals the distinctive moral, political and rhetorical aspects that, combined, yield a comprehensive account that allows us to distinguish the statesman from the demagogue. Accordingly, in the discussion below, we take up each of these aspects of the classical understanding to see what is distinctly modern about the populist. What our discussion will reveal, in each instance, is that the theoretical concerns and presuppositions of modernity, both in its liberal and counter-liberal aspects, as noted above, refract and inflect the terms of the debates and, in doing so, occlude the character of the modern populist.

To what extent does the moral dimension of the classical understanding of the demagogue capture an important aspect of the populist? In classical thought, the major difference between the statesman and the demagogue is that the demagogue seeks rule for self-aggrandizement. The modern view of the populist, as our discussion above indicates, shows a variety of divergent positions on this formulation due to tensions within modernity regarding the nature of leadership and the character of politics more generally. The first is the claim that this conception of demagogue is unhelpful or meaningless because individuals and their psychology are not consequential in politics due to the predominance of larger historical movements (whether spiritual or material), unconscious forces or the primacy of behaviours over intentions. The second is to concede an important role to leadership but to deny any difference between statesman and populist on the basis that all leaders are power-seeking individuals. This approach has been justified on the basis of a scientific or positivistic impulse in modern social sciences that seek to observe effects rather than make moral or evaluative judgments.[36] Confronted with this dilemma, the third position has been to accept a moral distinction between statesman and populist but to find this distinction not in a leader's character or ambition but in their rhetoric. This approach reduces populism to a question of rhetorical technique and nothing more. As a result, leaders who use certain forms of expression are called populist and others are not.[37] The final approach is to see the populist as a unique leader, a special figure ordained by spirit, or fate, to promise a new beginning. This view sees the populist as a "charismatic" or creative individual who transforms and reconstitutes politics in radically new ways. Such an approach clearly makes the populist an exceptional and morally ambiguous phenomenon rather than an ordinary and recognizable aspect of democratic politics. In doing so, however, it excludes a range of leaders who are clearly not exceptional in this sense yet nevertheless could be understood as populists.[38]

These contending modern presuppositions, individually and combined, have in effect complicated and obscured the question of who is a populist and therefore, in important respects, can be seen as the theoretical provenance of the seeming elusiveness of the populist in the contemporary scholarship. In other words, the divergence and diversity in the scholarship, I suggest, has its source not in the nature of the populist itself but in modernity and its ambition to solve the problem of the demagogue. More significantly, to the extent that these approaches all neglect or deny the important moral dimension of the populist, they necessarily preclude the relevance of the classical understanding of the demagogue and consequently emphasize other aspects, such as rhetoric, culture or ideology, to understand the

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nature of the populist. Yet when we put to one side these theoretical presuppositions, what emerges is the similarity of the populist and the demagogue, in terms of their moral disposition, character and ambition, and therefore the relevance of the classical conception of the demagogue for our contemporary understanding of the populist. To be sure, the evaluation of the motives of leaders and therefore our ability to distinguish between the statesman, demagogue and the tyrant has, in practice, always been fraught with difficulty, not least because our judgment can be clouded by the unavoidably partisan nature of political struggles. This problem is exacerbated in the case of the populist by the power and prevalence of modern concepts and formulations, making it hard to distinguish the populist who exploits them, especially those who do so by devising bespoke ideologies ("Peronism"), from millenarian leaders who genuinely see themselves as servants of history or the embodiment of the "Will of the People." One way to address this problem, I suggest, is by recovering the classical concept of magnanimity that distinguished between noble ambition and mere self-advancement.[39]

The second important aspect of the classical understanding of the demagogue concerned the political context, specifically the struggle between the few and many and therefore the importance of democracy as a regime for understanding the demagogue. As our discussion has revealed, both the demagogue and populist are essentially linked to democracy. Yet the classical regime is significantly different from the modern state, above all in the fact that modern democracies are liberal—founded and defined by constitutionalism, separation of power, an independent judiciary and concepts of rights (whether natural or human). This means the populist confronts more extensive and formidable hurdles and obstacles in the state than the demagogue did in the classical regime.[40] The demagogue, as leader of the many, was seen as an essentially democratic phenomenon. Insofar as demagogues posed a challenge to good public policy and the stability of the regime, they were also seen as the perennial weakness of the otherwise stable democratic regime that needed to be moderated or ameliorated. The populist, located in the modern ordering of the state, presents a different character. Because of the asserted neutrality of the modern state regarding regime type, the populist is no longer understood as the inevitable problem of democracy. Attempts to view the populist as a larger political problem not directly linked to democracy have in general proven to be unhelpful because they have made the populist "disappear." One such approach, as we have seen, has been to view the populist as a sociological or cultural phenomenon. Another has resulted in a shift in focus from the "populist" (the person) to a concept wholly unknown in classical political thought—"populism"—to understand the phenomenon of the populist. The continuing debates regarding the efficacy of these sociological and "ideological" approaches confirm the relevance and salience of democracy for understanding the populist.[41] Yet the modern political context of the state has made a significant difference for the populist, as opposed to the classical demagogue. The modern liberal-democratic state's attempt to address the problem of the demagogue institutionally has resulted in a series of formidable obstacles to the ambition of the populist.[42] Modern states, to the extent that they are founded on constitutions, tend to be representative democracies that limit executive power, through term limits, or by dividing and defraying power, or even through federalism. Combined with limitations on executives imposed by bills of rights, democratic and procedural difficulties of amending constitutions and the oversight

exercised by a legally protected judiciary with powers of judicial review, we can see that the populist now confronts complex and interrelated institutional obstacles that were previously unknown to the demagogue. In this sense the populist is in a much weaker position than the demagogue.[43]

To what extent does rhetoric, the third aspect of the classical definition of the demagogue, reveal important insights into the question of who is a populist and, more specifically, what is modern about the populist? Our discussion suggests that in focusing on rhetoric or persuasive speech, we discern a significant difference between the populist and the demagogue. The demagogue's power lay in the ability to appeal to, and therefore exploit, the passions of the people, making the people angry or indignant by showing the injustice of the rich and fanning their envy and greed by promising to distribute the ill-gotten wealth of the rich to the poor. They were also made fearful by showing how their freedom was being threatened or subverted by domestic or foreign oligarchic conspiracies. Importantly, though the demagogue in the small community of the *polis* was restrained by rules, laws and conventions, the great bulwark against him was the perception of his legitimacy. The demagogue had to pretend to be a statesman, concerned with the common good and with the interests of the *polis* at heart. He was therefore burdened with the fear of being called a demagogue by other leaders who could appeal to a public educated to discern the art of rhetoric and how it revealed the difference between the statesman and the demagogue. The populist, too, I would argue, appeals to the passions of the people and in general wants to avoid the charge of being a populist. But in two respects the populist is better armed than the demagogue. The first is that Hobbes's assumption that we are all power seekers, comparable to Hume's "just *political* maxim, that *every man must be supposed a knave*" [italics in original] sustains the contemporary anti-politics and anti-politician sentiment that is unable to distinguish between statesman and populist.[44] Where the demagogue was proud to claim to be a political leader, the populist exploits the charge that "all politicians are the same" with the simple expedient of claiming they are not. To be politically inexperienced, with no real record of public service, is for the populist a badge of honour rather than the indictment of lack of ability and experience that it had been in the past. The populist can therefore now defend his or her legitimacy by the simple expedient of claiming to have never served in office or been a leader, as opposed to the demagogue who had to show good leadership.[45] The second concerns the more expansive range of concepts and formulations available to populists to achieve their goal of persuading the people and thereby secure their private advantage or—depending on their own self-awareness—fulfil their chosen role in a grander political drama. This advantage is due to the more extensive lexicon and concepts at the disposal of the populist due to the nature of modern politics. While the demagogue deployed the language of the rich or poor, citizenship and justice, the modern populist's vocabulary is now unmoored from the political. It is instead abstract, religious, scientific and metaphysical.[46] Instead of rich and poor, it now consists of defending the one "class" against the predations of others.[47] The "many" is now seen as the virtuous "People," defined by nation, ethnos, faith or history.[48] The wealthy few are now cunning "elites" with their hidden yet vast conspiracies. This new lexicon and repertoire expands the glossary of indignation or resentment (even if not speaking of

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justice, as such, because it remains fundamentally political), allowing the populist to make claims and assertions in shorthand, within scientific, religious or ideological frameworks that define terms and debates. This new language of populism can in addition draw on the seemingly limitless power of the state and the technological advances it promotes and wields. The obstacle to speaking to everyone due to the size and scope of the modern state can therefore be overcome by the populist through radio, television and modern social media that promise faux familiarity and intimacy. Combined with modern refinements in marketing and advertising, the populist can now make use of costly, yet comprehensive, ubiquitous, and repetitive propaganda that declares or asserts simple words or phrases instead of persuading the public with complex and nuanced arguments. These advantages therefore make the populist a more formidable and dangerous challenge to democracy than the classical demagogue.

Conclusion

We started with the question of who is a modern populist, made salient by contemporary political circumstances. To answer this question, we returned to what seemed like an earlier version of the populist, the demagogue, to see what was specifically modern about the populist. Having examined classical political thought and the modern responses to the challenges of revealed religion, we can see why the populist has emerged from modern liberal attempts to solve the problem of the demagogue and how contending currents in modernity have obscured and made elusive the nature of the populist. Nevertheless, we can now make a number of observations on the differences between the two that will allow us to see the modernity of the populist. Both populist and demagogue address the same political phenomenon—a political leader who seeks personal, rather than common, advantage by unscrupulous appeals to the desires and passions of the many. Though the populist and the demagogue are identical in this moral aspect, there are nevertheless significant differences between them due to the modern political institutions and in the ideas and concepts that inform contemporary political debates. The populist is much more constrained than the demagogue by the success of liberal aspects of modernity, specifically the principle of the rule of law and the institutions shaped by it in modern constitutionalism. Though at a significant disadvantage to the demagogue in this respect, the populist has also benefited from counter-liberal modernity in terms of the language and ideas of modern politics. Politics of class, race and religion, as well as heated nationalism, are new means at the disposal of populists who can present themselves as defenders of the modern conception of "the People." Combined with the modern techniques of advertising and social media, the populist becomes a much more potent force in politics compared to the demagogue. It would therefore appear that modernity did achieve significant success in taming the problem of the demagogue. Yet to the extent that the populist is now armed with modern ideology and the power of the modern state, it would seem the problem of the demagogue has not been solved but has now reasserted itself with greater technological vigour and philosophic menace.

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Notes

1 The term can be traced, according to Canovan (1981), to the agrarian Populist (or People's) Party in America in the 1880s. Another early instance is the Russian Narodniki movement by intellectuals.

2 See, for example, the way the term *demagogue* has been replaced by *populist* in Google Scholar and Google Analytics.

3 On Max Weber's "charisma" or "gift of grace" as a useful approach for understanding populists, see Willner (1984) and Albertazzi and McDonnell (2015).

4 This focus on rhetoric takes a number of different approaches. There is the emphasis on political communication (Roberts-Miller, 2005; Delsol, 2013), on populism as communication "style" (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014) and as "discourse" that is beyond Left or Right: "There is in any society a reservoir of raw anti-status-quo feelings which crystalize in some symbols quite independently of the forms of their political articulation, and it is their presence we intuitively perceive when we call a discourse or a mobilization 'populistic'" (Laclau, 2007: 123).

5 On the link between the two, see Mudde and Kaltwasser (2014). This allows "populist" to become an adjective that can describe not only leaders but other political phenomena, such as political parties or movements: see Mudde (2007); Albertazzi and McDonnell (2015); Zaslove (2008).

6 On populism generally, see Ionescu and Gellner (1969); Taggart (2000); Canovan (1981, 2005). Consider the early and influential work by Canovan (1981), who concludes that we cannot "hope to reduce all cases of populism to a single definition or find a single essence behind all established uses of the term." She therefore examines seven types of populism, ranging from peasant movements to politicians' populism. In a similar vein, Taguieff (1995) discerns three successive waves of populism: agrarian populism, Latin American populism and new-right populism. On "new populism" as an attempt to save the concept by incorporating "local colour," see Taggart (2000) and Canovan (2005: 74–77). Taggart (2000: 5) defines populism in terms of an "ideal type" opposed to representative democracy: "Populism is an episodic, anti-political, empty-hearted, chameleonic celebration of the heartland in the face of crisis."

7 For Mudde (2007: 23), populism is "a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous 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." This "thin ideology," according to Stanley (2008), is constituted by the idea of popular sovereignty, as well as by an antagonistic relationship between "the people" and "the elite," in which the former is valorized and the latter is denigrated.

8 Populist leaders, once dominant in Latin American and Asian politics, are now increasingly asserting their authority in Western democracies, especially in Europe. On populists in Latin America and Asia, see Weyland (2001). On European populists, see Mény and Surel (2002); Betz (1994); Albertazzi and McDonnell (2015).

9 See Lane (2012) and contrast this view with Finley (1962); Roberts-Miller (2005); Neumann (1938); Signer (2009); Ceasar (2007); Lane (2012). Finley (1962) argues that what is decisive for understanding the demagogue is the extent to which his policies undermine the common good.

10 See, for example, Aristophanes, *Knights* and *Frogs*, and Dorey (1956); Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (1980: 212–17, 219–23, 277, 282–84, 287–89, 338, 348–51, 353–54); Plutarch (1975: 631, 723).

11 On Cleon generally, see Lang (1972); Woodhead (1960); Signer (2009: 40–50). For an example of a Roman demagogue, see Plutarch (1975). Caius turned away from the Senate to face the people and, with this minor change, transformed the way senators proposed public policy.

12 Aristotle, *Politics* (1984: 153–54; book 5, chapter 4).

13 Plato, *Gorgias*; *Laws*; *Sophist*.

14 Aristotle, *Politics* (1984: 125; book 4, chapter 4, 1292a). Ceasar (2007) thus distinguishes between a "Type I" demagogue, who gains influence through oratory only, which is increasingly divisive and extreme, and who abandons propriety but in the name of defending the regime, with a "Type II" demagogue, such as Alcibiades or Caesar, who is more capable and ambitious and who seeks to overturn republican rule. As Signer (2009: 31) notes, *The Federalist Papers* starts by observing that "of those men who have overturned the republic, the greatest number have begun their career by playing obsequious court to the people, commencing demagogues and ending tyrants."

15 On the nature of regimes, see Plato's *Republic* (1991) and Aristotle's *Politics* (1984). Aristotle discusses the best regime in the *Politics*, book 2 (55–85), and the types of regimes and what sustains them especially in

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books 4 (118–46) and 5 (147–81), with a particular focus on democracy in book 6 (182–96). For a modern assessment of democracy as regime and the demagogue as a specific problem of democracy, see Signer (2009).

16 Aristotle, *Politics*, 1279b33–1281a10 (1984: 97–99).

17 See generally Aristotle, *Politics*, books 4–6 (1984: 118–96) on how to moderate regimes, and books 7–8 on the importance of education (197–241).

18 It was for this reason that classical thinkers regarded the polity, or mixed regime, as the most stable: see, for example, Aristotle, *Politics*, books 3 and 4; Cicero, *Republic*, book 1; Polybius, *Histories*, book 6.

19 See the discussion of how the tyrant arises from democracy in Plato's *Republic* 571 a–592 b (1992: 251–75). See also Aristotle, *Politics* 1292a1–35 (1984: 130–31).

20 See, for example, Plato's *Republic*, *Alcibiades* I and II, Xenophon's *Education of Cyrus* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

21 Plato's distinction between statesman and demagogue and his critique of rhetoric in the *Republic*, *Statesman*, *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus* are intended to serve this purpose. Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, his invention and thereby moderation of the new art of rhetoric, is designed to serve the same purpose: see Garsten (2006). On the importance of such education for Athenian democracy, see Ober (1989); Yunis (1996).

22 The demagogue is still a theme for some modern scholars: see, for example, Luthin (1959), Lomas (1968), Logue and Dorgan (1981) and Signer (2009). But the overwhelming emphasis is now on the populist and "populism."

23 On the religious confrontation with philosophy, consider the attempts by Augustine and Aquinas to reconcile Christianity and philosophy, as well as how Maimonides fulfilled a similar role for Judaism, as did Farabi and Avicenna for Islam. For a general overview, see Pangle (2003).

24 On false prophets, see for example: Matthew 7:15–23; Matthew 24:24; 1 John 4:1–6; Acts 13:6.

25 Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1985: 61–62). Note also Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* (1996: 131), where he claims "our religion" has "rendered the world weak and given it prey to criminal men, who can manage it securely, seeing that collectivity of man, so as to go to paradise, think more of enduring their beatings than of avenging them."

26 Reference to Hobbes's *Leviathan* is as follows: (*Lev.*, chapter, page number) (Hobbes, 1968).

27 See, for example, Hobbes's *Behemoth*, where he examines the role of religious sects and especially of Oliver Cromwell in the English Civil War, and the *Leviathan*, the second half of which is dedicated to the problem of religion in politics. In the *Leviathan*, Hobbes challenges those who speak of the "Kingdom of Darkness," as well as the dissenters' new popular appeal to "conscience," which he believed was a novel source of demagoguery (see Garsten, 2006: 43).

28 "Neither *Plato*," according to Hobbes, "nor any other philosopher hitherto, hat put into order, and sufficiently, or probably proved all the Theoremes of Morall Doctrine, that many may learn thereby, both how to govern, and how to obey" (*Lev.* XXXI, 407–8). On the promise of everlasting commonwealth, see *Lev.* XXX, 378.

29 "Vaine-glory," or pride, is for Hobbes a form of "exultation of the mind," which he diagnoses as a form of madness (*Lev.* VI, 125).

30 See Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* and its influence on the American founders. The demagogue remains a problem for the American founders, as is evident from *The Federalist Papers*. As Ceasar (2007: 260) notes, demagoguery is seen by the founders as a significant challenge to modern republicanism, to be addressed by expanding the size of the polity, constitutionalizing presidential communication and extending the terms of presidency.

31 On Montesquieu's attempt to marshal ambition institutionally and its influence on the American founding, see Epstein (1984); Krause (2002).

32 Compare, for example, Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, where he criticizes all modern thinkers, especially Rousseau, and Rousseau's *Social Contract*, where we see his trenchant critique of the *philosophes* and, in particular, of Hobbes, Locke and their defence of the "bourgeoisie."

33 On the problem of individuals in history, see Plekhanov (1961); Althusser (1969). On recent attempts to recover a notion of individual agency, see Forbes (2015).

34 Thus the crucial role of such exceptional individuals is taken up in Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, which in turn becomes Heidegger's *Führerprinzip*.

35 Neumann (1938), at the threshold of the Second World War, sees the distinguishing features of the modern demagogue in an era of modern liberalism, mass democracy and the breakdown of major institutions as someone who promises stability; someone who is a democrat or of the people and who uses personal, militant rule

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based on action instead of program; and someone who uses elaborate propaganda relying on simplification and repetition. In the American context, see Ceasar (2007), who argues modern democratic leaders have replaced "rhetoric" with "public relations," giving rise to the "personal" presidency or what Tulis (1987) calls the "rhetorical" presidency. On the challenge of the modern media for democratic leadership, see Helms (2012).

36 The problem with this approach, as we have seen, has been a denial that populists exist or an assumption that all leaders are populists. See, for example, Roberts-Miller (2005), who argues that the need for a "technical" understanding of "demagoguery" that favoured a "naturalistic" model based on effectiveness and a positivist view of public discourse contributed to its abandonment in rhetorical studies.

37 The difficulty with this is that in modern democracies, all leaders may, in certain circumstances, be compelled to use "populist" rhetoric: see Ceasar (2007).

38 For a critical examination of the concept of "charisma" and its limitations, see Bensman and Givant (1975); Riesebrodt (1999); Turner (2003); Mudde and Kaltwasser (2014); McDonnell (2016).

39 See Aristotle, *Ethics* (1123a35-1125b35) and Patapan (2016).

40 See Canovan (2005: 74–77). Additional factors include the role of parties (Jaros and Mason, 1969) and the concept of democracy itself (Capoccia, 2001). On whether populism is a pathology of *representative* democracy or merely an "empty shell," see Mény and Surel (2002).

41 Canovan (1982) argues that attempts at a *theory* of populism invariably fail because they are either too wide-ranging to be clear or too restricted to be persuasive. She favours a phenomenological approach, leading to a descriptive typology.

42 These obstacles are not insurmountable for a determined populist, and their resilience will vary for each country, subject to its religion, history and culture. Consider, for example, Berlet and Lyons (2000) who explore anti-governmental organizations in America.

43 As Abts and Rummens (2007: 421) note, populist leaders "have to consider their political opponents, parliament and the constitution as obstacles to be ignored or even removed," making populism "proto-totalitarian."

44 David Hume (1987). On the contemporary problem of anti-politics, see Flinders (2012).

45 The modern concept of the "elite" allows the populist to define himself in negative terms: someone who is "anti-elite." Consider, in this light, Australia's Pauline Hanson, Italy's Silvio Berlusconi, Hungary's Viktor Orbán, Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro, and even the US's Donald Trump—all of whom claimed "outsider" status.

46 On the importance of religion for modern populists, see for example, Matteo Salvini of Italy, Jörg Haider and Heinz-Christian Strache of Austria, and in general, Marzouki et al. (2016).

47 On the use of class, see for example, Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela and Laclau's (2007) account of populism informed by ideas of hegemonic class.

48 Consider, for example, Canovan's (2005) overview of the concept of "the people," Taggart's (2000: 91–98) discussion of "heartland," and Mény and Surel's (2002) reference to "the people" to mean, variously, "rightful sovereign," "downtrodden class" and "nation."

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