Civil Society, Populism and Liberalism

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Abstract

This paper considers the threats that various kinds of populism might be said to pose to the ideal of a civil society that mediates between ‘private’ and family life and the state. Although it is difficult to generalise about populisms, just about all—whether on left or right—share a hostility to ‘intermediate’ powers. Of course civil society is exactly what could be called a forum for intermediate powers. In contrast, populists often tend to emphasise a vision of *immediate* power in the sense of the possibility of the direct expression of the people’s will in political institutions. Populists, of whatever pitch, often tend to invoke a partisan state that will be on the side of the people (however defined) rather than a putatively neutral ‘liberal’ state that stands over and against civil society. These factors make most populisms more or less generically hostile to liberalism, understood not in ideological terms but more as a doctrine which emphasises the necessity of mediating power through institutions. Very often, populism is a threat to the idea of civil society understood as a concept integral to liberal political theory, as a means of balancing the state and its wider interlocutors. In this paper, various means, largely inspired by the writings of Tocqueville on the one hand and Paul Hirst on the other, are suggested for addressing aspects of this predicament.

Keywords Civil society · Democracy · Liberalism · Populism

The question of the fate—and possible future—of civil society today, the question central to all the papers in this collection, raises the question of populism for a simple reason. Just about all understandings of civil society and its merits stress the importance of *intermediate* powers: civil society as made up of various kinds of association, civil society as existing *between* the state and the demos, and so on. Populism on the other hand, however difficult it is to generalise about its many varieties, tends to entail the invocation of *immediate* powers (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Muller 2016; Foreign Affairs 2016). The political theorist Nadia Urbaniti has described this basic populist emphasis nicely as the ideal of ‘direct representation’, an

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oxymoron, certainly, but one which captures much of the gist of many populisms whether of left or right (Urbaniti 2015).

This emphasis on direct power as being very basic to just about all populisms, however, means that if we are to have a definition of populism at all, on the one hand it is going to be quite generalising with all the risks that involves, and on the other hand it has to be, if it is to work as a generalisation at all, basically *negative*. In other words, populism, on this conception anyway, is more a relational than a substantive category; what populisms have in common is negative, lying in what they oppose rather than what they espouse. Really? Surely it might be said that all populisms share, if implicitly, a positive valorisation of ‘the people’. But it appears that the people, being an elusive indeed rhetorical idea if ever there were one, always has to be valorised, as it were negatively, as against the obstacles to that valorisation (Molyneux and Osborne 2017). So if there are a huge number of different types of populism out there, left and right, what they share is what, in different ways, they often tend to oppose: elites, establishments, representatives detached from the people and, depending on the political cast of the populism in question, outsiders or perhaps ‘parasites’ that are to blame for the people’s predicament whether these are conceptualised (say, on the right) as migrants or (say, on the left) as capitalists or financial speculators, or (on the left and right) self-interested politicians or EU bureaucrats, experts of various kinds or whatever.

This generalising approach has advantages and limitations. The limitations are obvious; all generalisation has to admit of cases and tendencies that do not fit and we need to be wary of this in every sentence of what follows. Populism on this conception, however, is not really a type of regime but a tendency, or as Hans-Werner Muller terms (in what is probably the best short overview of the populist moment) a ‘shadow’ on liberal democracies (Muller 2016). As such all populisms tend to be hybrid; for instance in their projects of ‘direct representation’ they will, of course, use representative institutions rather than be tempted, as with fascism, to attempt to abolish them altogether. And of course just about all liberal democracies have and have had populist tendencies; in UK history, for instance, there were clearly populist tendencies to the various governments of Churchill, Thatcher, Blair and Boris Johnson but it would be absurd to say that these were simply populist governments as such. ‘Pure’ populism does not exist, not even with Viktor Orban or Juan Peron (Molyneux and Osborne 2017).

In what follows we shall consider, rather selectively, some of the plausible tensions between the idea of civil society, understood as a liberal institution, and populism understood as a gamut of broadly anti-liberal tendencies. It should be emphasised that one crucial issue is, whilst central, developed more speculatively than perhaps one would like; that of causation. Has the growth of populism itself undermined the integrity and robustness of civil society, or is populism itself a symptom of that apparent decline? Our hunch is more towards the latter model than the former; or at least we would say that the growth of populism owes much to the crisis of liberalism. But of course this is a two-way process; once populists gather around the sinkholes created by problems with liberalism they reinforce the sense of a crisis. But the force of the contention that liberalism is in crisis is in fact that our stance here will not be to denounce or condone populism outright. Some right-wing populisms are outright racist; some other versions are indeed ‘progressive’. Take your pick. But, whatever ideological form taken by populisms, they do latch onto something very real; the fact that liberalism is in some kind of crisis of legitimacy and just about all of them address exactly that.

If there is an advantage to our generalising approach it is to see populism not simply as an ideologically substantive phenomenon of, say, the right—as it is treated in so many analyses—but as something more fundamental to (or perhaps, rather, against) the basic structures of

power and legitimacy in many modern societies. Above all, and as already suggested, our negative understanding of populism will help us see that the growth of so many populisms in recent years is closely connected to the crisis of what, broadly speaking, can be labelled liberalism, meaning not Liberal parties as such, or liberal ideology, but broadly liberal *institutions* that mediate between the demos and the exercise of power. That is the real target of our reflections here. Liberal institutions of this sort would include parliaments, the idea of the ‘rule of law’, and also principles in law such as those, centrally, of toleration and equal citizenship. They would also include the institution (or set of institutions) at central consideration here: civil society.

Civil Society

Let us look further at the extent to which civil society can be described as a liberal idea. This will help us address the extent to which the onset of recent populisms can be ascribed largely if not entirely to a crisis within liberalism itself. Most usually, civil society, as we have said, is used to designate, relatively, an intermediate status; however conceived, it sits somewhere between two other entities, most usually the state and the more privatised world of the family. For much liberal democratic thought civil society is represented as a bulwark against the alternatives of occluded, wholly privatised, even atomised existence and a big state that suppresses personal freedoms by imposing its own norms exclusively. Where there is nothing to oppose it then it is difficult to invoke civil society at all. For instance, when there is talk of a *global* civil society this seems to function only as a metaphor when not attached to some or other limiting idea of the state; indeed, to invoke the very idea of a global civil society entails extending the basic remit of the term itself as, arguably, to make it just about meaningless (cf. Kaldor 2003, pp. 44–45).

What lies ‘between’ privatism and the state is, however, a debated issue—and one would have to retrace all the iterations of the concept of civil society to document these. But in fact the currency of the modern notion of civil society as intermediate is itself more recent than we might think. It is a notion that belongs more to latter-day ideas of liberal democracy than to the longer-term history of liberal thought itself. Locke, for instance, hardly regarded civil society in this way, i.e. as an intermediate form. For him, it was synonymous with political society. Foucault’s ingenious interpretation notwithstanding, the same goes for Adam Ferguson, albeit as it were the other way around (Ferguson 1995 [1767]; Foucault 2008). For Ferguson it was not that civil society was synonymous with political society but that political society was reducible to the history of civil society in the sense of large-scale social formations ordered in particular ways. For Ferguson the history of civil society was, in effect, the history, generally, of society—and this was, as Foucault says of Montesquieu’s essay on the decline of the Romans, one of the first analyses of a ‘economico-political type’ (Foucault 2004, p. 147). Hegel’s thought perhaps came closest to the more contemporary idea of civil society as something that exists *between* the state and—in his version—the privatised sphere of family life. Civil society, here, is antidote to the atomisation of individual and ethical life. Hegel’s thought is not, however, particularly apposite to the norms of liberal democracy; his conception of the State as a kind of spiritual agency runs against latter-day notions of the state as a neutral arbiter of affairs rather than the embodiment of some or other *Volk* (Pelczynski 1984; cf. Hirst 1997, pp. 199–200).

There is no space of course for the full history here. Suffice to say that it was only much later, in the 1980s, with the critique of both unregulated capitalism and state socialism that the

notion of civil society as mediator between privatism and the state came into its own (Bernhard 1993; Hall 1995; Hirst 1997, pp. 156–181). As such it was as much a normative view as it was a representation of any actually existing state of affairs. It is ironic that within Eastern Europe itself the invocation of the notion of civil society in the 1980s and after seemed more to function as a screen concept for capitalist or at least market relations of kinds that might be autonomous from the state; though, somewhat paradoxically, in the liberal West it tended to represent non-capitalist, indeed non-economic forms of voluntary and independent organisation (Habermas 1997, p. 366). But even when it was in effect a way of invoking capitalism without actually invoking it, civil society was certainly in what would now be called the ‘progressive’ or emancipatory camp. Civil society would be a good thing if it could be attained; but it always, in Habermas’s language, hovered somewhere between fact and norm.

At any event, the concept of civil society came to designate a combination of relations of trust and community combined with the virtues of independence from given institutions of power and control. Such a relatively ‘thin’ and even rather formalist take on the concept might use Ernest Gellner’s definition as a baseline: ‘Civil society is that set of diverse non-governmental institutions which is strong enough to counterbalance the state and, while not preventing the state from fulfilling its role of keeper of the peace and arbitrator between major interests, can nevertheless prevent it from dominating and atomizing the rest of society’ (Gellner 1996, p. 5). It is as such the domain of a regulated freedom, but a freedom that is not simply reducible to individualisation and atomisation, but which is ‘normed’, socialised, dynamic and, as it were, interactive and indeed constitutive of mutuality and trust.

Moral or Political?

But even here the concept of civil society, as it were, splits between two rather different conceptions: moral or political. Gellner’s definition does a good job of merging both, but they need to be separated analytically since they are actually different. The issue is important for our consideration of what is at stake here: the question of what set of relations, if any, pertains between the relatively recent onset of populisms and any decline in the fabric of civil society, plus the related—more normative—issue as to how civil society might be reinforced. These issues turn around the question, invoked by Gellner, of *atomisation*. Without a robust civil society, the argument runs, the danger is a sort of deracinated individualism, with the associated risk of ‘capture’ by the non-liberal forces of—take your pick—despotism, nationalism, totalitarianism, intolerance, demagoguery and of course, if perhaps less dramatically than at least some of these putative threats, populism.

Our argument here will be that, when it comes to issues such as populism that can in some guises seem to threaten liberal institutions, the best kind of buffer is civil society understood *politically* rather than morally. To see this we now turn to one of the great inspirations for theories of civil society—the work of Alexis de Tocqueville.

Tocqueville is interesting not least because both—moral and political—conceptions of civil society appear to be present in his work. Now, most usually, Tocqueville is interpreted in what is basically a moral way, as a communitarian thinker, and his version of civil society is typically viewed as an institutional expression of communitarianism. Associations exist in civil society and they are there to balance the state. This, then, is the *moral* idea of civil society. Certainly civil society in Tocqueville is to do with more than utilitarian interest. Rather, Tocqueville emphasised the importance of the generation of conceptions of ‘interest, properly

understood' or what he termed 'enlightened egoism' (Tocqueville 2004, pp. 610–13). Civil society is the domain where such interests are nurtured, galvanised and put to work. As Arthur Goldhammer has pointed out 'interest, properly understood' means something more than just utilitarian self-interest (Goldhammer 2006). It is not simply to do with market relations between the family and the state but has to do with a 'thicker' sense of interest, glossed nicely by Claus Offe as 'stakeholder' rather than 'shareholder' interests (Offe 2005, pp. 30–31). Interest, properly understood, is 'enlarged' interest; it both is shaped by and shapes political life, but ultimately it is a moral conception to do not so much with our instincts or material priorities but, as Tocqueville famously expressed it, our 'habits of the heart'.

It is important to see that this conception of civil society is never absolute but always relational. This is not least why it is difficult to define, indeed impossible to define in an absolutely substantive way. One cannot be essentialist about it: religious groups, for instance, can be part of civil society, as they were for Tocqueville in the US context in that they were separated from the political sphere, but equally—for instance in a theocratic state—they may not be. But if civil society is always related to the state on the one hand and to kinds of privatism on the other, this means that it is a mistake to understand it simply on communitarian terms. The resurgence of interest in Tocqueville largely came about as the result of equating his thinking with the latter-day communitarianism of writers such as Robert Bellah or Charles Taylor. But as Dana Villa has pointed out in a stimulating article, this rather diminishes the sense that even for Tocqueville himself the concept of civil society was in fact more a political than a moral idea (Villa 2006). And this, then, is the second conception of civil society—*political* not moral.

Actually it is not exactly a question of pitting morality against the political sphere but rather of invoking a more *directly* political conception. According to Villa's persuasive analysis instead of contrasting the morality of civil society to the politics of the state (what she terms Tocqueville's 'official' view—one he tends to invoke rather than actually use) a better option in posing the issue (Tocqueville's 'actual' view) is in terms of an opposition between localised and public liberty: civil society as a *decentralised and pluralistic public-political realm poised to be* versus *centralised power* (Villa 2006, pp. 219–220). On Tocqueville's own account, far from being a separate moral sphere, civil society is directly political; only it is political in a different way from the politics of the central state. In the light of this claim, Villa emphasises three aspects of Tocqueville's conception: first, 'permanent' yet localised political entities such as townships, cities and counties and other such sites of administration; second, voluntary associations including political parties; third, civil associations, such as religious groupings and also the press and newspapers (Villa 2006, pp. 224–225).

As such, this conception has more in common with Montesquieu's political conception of political 'intermediate powers' rather than moralised invocations of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* (see Hirst 1997, pp. 122–123). Montesquieu was the predecessor to Tocqueville on this score, not in demanding the 'minimalist' state of so-called classical liberalism but in arguing for a panoply of political institutions to balance and correct the centralising tendencies of the state. On this conception, civil society in all its myriad institutional aspects is not a moral sphere outside politics but an instrument of power, balanced against other powers.

When understood on the moral-communitarian model, basically as voluntary associations of a moral rather than a political sort, the concept of civil society in fact does not tell us very much about the relations of this sphere to political life. Tocqueville—and later Max Weber—of course made influential arguments to do with the extent to which voluntary associations in the USA served both as training grounds for politics and civic culture and as buffers against

political power. But in fact Tocqueville actually emphasised things more in the other direction—for him, politics itself was the driving force; ‘politics generalizes the taste for and habit of association’, and politics is a schooling for associationalism rather than associationalism a schooling for politics (Tocqueville 2004, p. 604). And of course, as already noted, the association was contingent—related specifically to the USA—rather than essential or universal. After all, as Tocqueville insisted, US voluntary associations tended to be of a particular kind. Negatively they were unsullied by the hierarchical traditions that European societies had inherited from the feudal era, and positively they were charged with Protestant *mores* that tended to be detached from direct political involvement (Offe 2005, p. 30). In other words, it was the type of association not merely the fact of association that was politically crucial. And after all, against the communitarian version of Tocqueville, we can point out that association itself does not guarantee ‘habits of the heart’ that are necessarily compatible with ‘liberal’ values of toleration and so on at all. As Dylan Riley has recently shown in an illuminating study of Italy, Spain and Romania, authoritarian regimes themselves can be related to the existence of strong, communitarian associations in civil society—that is, in a moral sense—and not just to the void of atomisation (Riley 2019). Here a strong civil society, that is civil society in the typical moral sense of the term, does not protect against despotism (here in fact, fascism) but can actually be seen to promote it.

It may be surmised, then, that what *does* feasibly protect, or at least may be protective against such non-liberal forces are associations in a political rather than simply a moral sense; active associations that form barriers and intermediate powers between privatism and the state. Or at least, this might be our hypothesis, and we can now explore it in what remains of our discussion.

Civil Society in a Political Sense

If communitarian moral density is not, then, the key to the political significance of civil society, even—at least on Villa’s interpretation—from Tocqueville’s own actual conception, or at least *usage*, of it, then we need to relieve Tocqueville of imputations of strong, ‘thick’ communitarianism. A better yardstick is the triumvirate, invoked by Villa in the context of the actual analyses of *Democracy in America*; those sorts of institutions that are *associations in a political sense*, for instance permanent associations, voluntary associations and civil associations of various kinds. ‘If we want to grasp Tocqueville’s idea of civil society’, writes Villa, ‘we must conceive of it not as a seemingly self-contained realm of mores, habits, and feelings, but rather as a sphere of politically invaluable mediating organizations, a sphere sustained by the “free *moeurs*” these organizations help to create and maintain’ (Villa 2006, p. 224). *Permanent associations*: these glossed by Villa, in terms of modern democracies, as ‘townships, cities, counties, and other sites of local political administration and participation’ (Villa 2006, p. 224; Tocqueville 2004, p. 215). *Voluntary associations*: these, likewise, are political; they are ‘those voluntary groups formed by like-minded individuals intent on advancing a particular doctrine or opinion’, most prominently political parties (Villa 2006, pp. 224–225; Tocqueville 2004, pp. 595–599). And *civil associations* per se: these include religious and commercial associations, and also the press and newspapers (Villa 2006, p. 225; Tocqueville 2004, pp. 600–603).

Discussions of liberalism and the detailed *political* fabric of associational life are oddly sparse in the literature (Levy 2017 is an exception). Only attention to these different spheres of

political association, as in the sections below, will enable us to determine whether or not we are, in any meaningful sense, beyond or rather after civil society and to what extent this might be either a good or, as is surely more likely, a bad thing. Now, populisms must surely have a role in this story. Again, however, we leave aside consideration of the vexed issue of causation in any detail. Is populism cause or symptom of the withering—if that is what it is—of these varied kinds of political associations? The actual answer is, again, probably both even if we emphasise the latter; but there is almost certainly a dynamic and a mutual not a static one-way causation here. At any event, populism in its varied forms (some of course more than others) could be said to attack all three types of associative power, basically by replacing them with its own brand of loyalty; or, perhaps more predominantly, it may also be a symptom of the hollowing out of all three, consequent on globalisation, corporate power, austerity policies or whatever one wants to invoke by way of causation.

Any serious consideration of such causal aspects is likely to focus on the apparent diminution of the nation-state as the obvious frame of participation, association and politics. Modern capitalism of course needs nation-states as the institutional anchorage of law and trust and also tends to undermine them as sources of labour and capital markets become more and more transnational; the state is both necessary yet, to an extent, strategically diminished in modern global capitalism (see Hirst 2005, pp. 22–23). Modern capitalist societies require broad but flexible levels of sociation as a means of furthering economic and social interaction within the context of the nation-state. In this sense, states and civil societies came to ‘fit’ each other. With the advent of neoliberalism and globalisation, however, this alignment has been, obviously, disrupted. In a world of transnational trade and globalised relations of movement (of both capital and labour) civil societies have been de-anchored from the context of the nation-state: trust relations are now, so to speak, as much horizontal (across states) than vertical (within them).

The result of this has been, arguably, a relative ‘hollowing out’ of the nation-state with its Gellnerite correlative, an atomisation of society, precisely away from the norms of a pluralised, political set of civil society institutions towards something like privatisation and individualisation. The welfare state, whatever its shortcomings, was at least a state of mutuality where there was the idea of a common project, or at least some kind of communality of fate, and a basic inclusivity; and Tocqueville himself insisted that associational life could only really thrive where there were no extremes (as they existed in Europe for instance) but only ‘shades of difference’, as in the USA (Tocqueville 2004, p. 221). Much of this has to do with equality. Feudalism may be a long way behind European states, but hierarchy and inequality certainly are not. Above all, the more inequality is experienced, the more there will be talk of those who are left behind, the precariat, the JAMs (just about managing) and so on. And the more, obviously enough, there will be populisms that exist to address these and other issues consequent upon this hollowing out, this atomisation of civil society. True, these considerations are somewhat speculative. But they make sense; on this model, liberalism itself will have brought about its own crisis of identity and legitimacy and populism will be, amongst other things, recognisable as a symptom of that.

Permanent Associations

Populists do not tend to be advocates of localised power and administration even though they might have their origins or grassroots in such localised or regional contexts. Populists, instead,

often want to invoke the state as an institution that is partisan towards their own interests (think of Trump's constant invocation of 'his people'). These sorts of populists do not seek to govern for the pluralized generality—they are not keen on Burkean ideas of representation, i.e. the deliberative representative, with an eye to the common good and who is not a direct envoy, a kind of robot. These sorts of populists, like their representatives, precisely, to be directed envoys, instructed by them and answerable to them, precisely on the basis of Urbaniti's paradox of 'direct representation' (Urbaniti 2015). Populists in this respect certainly tend to rather idealised conceptions of direct, immediate power; they tend to distrust representative, intermediate institutions and to demand unmediated power, holding that the will of the people can be expressed directly.

Populism, indeed, is very often all about this idea of *direct* power. The ideal is to have no representative 'space' between the popular will and its expression—directly—in forms of power. These sorts of populists, however, are not, as some have claimed, fascists. Fascists want to reconstitute the state itself; populists—left or right—want to capture it, the existing state, for themselves and re-orientate it in their own image. They want to make it partisan for them. Where Fascism sought to destroy civil society and make it coterminous with the state, populists want to capture civil society for themselves. As such populisms tend to be generically retrospective in outlook in that they turn towards some presumed sense of authenticity, some sense of who 'we' once were that needs to be restored. Of course, in its right-wing version this can embody a reactionary 'nativism' that some have compared with fascism. It may certainly involve racism pure and simple. Nevertheless, unlike fascistic discourses populism *can* co-exist internally with liberal democracy itself; it is not simply an incursion from outside. Populism, then, whether right or left tends more often than not to be a state-centred discourse; the aim is generally speaking to capture the state, and once captured to govern in the interests of the state understood directly as the interests of the people. Here politics and morality are collapsed into each other: the 'people' is nothing if not a moral conception (in most populist discourse there is a peculiar 'self-evidence' about them—to opponents this of course just appears to be foggiess) but it is a moral conception that is supposed to map directly onto the political powers of the state, such that one might equally claim that populism is a political conception, if it is a political conception at all, that is overdetermined by a moral one.

In the face of this a renewed politics of 'permanent associations' would seek to counterbalance the state by pluralising more non-state forms of political power and sovereignty and by pitting political structures against this 'moralisation' of society, through politico-institutional forms of urban governance, local governance and regional governance. Towns and cities have long been integral to the imagination of *political* liberty (Hirst 2005, p. 9). Yet in the contemporary era, as Paul Hirst argued so cogently, the possibilities for civic and other non-state rationalities of political power are both urgent and fragile: urgent because cities have been and could be counterbalances to state power whilst also being sites for the schooling of politics, and yet fragile because today urban governance is threatened not just by state power itself, and by the increasing transnationalism of corporate power, but also by the increasing agglomeration of cities themselves as well as by parallel effects such as 'exurbanisation' (Hirst 2005, p. 10, 17). The 'publicising' of civil society, in Hirst's phrase—the democratisation of associations, quasi-public bodies and quangos and the like—perhaps ironically would have to be an aspect of state policy itself rather than being simply a 'grassroots' idea; but this would make sense from the perspective of a more general need to protect the principles of representative power from populists and others, such as the proponents of identity politics of various kinds, who seek the expression of their aims on the illiberal principles of direct power (cf. Hirst 1997, pp. 112–113).

Perhaps, then, the solution, if there is one, is that persuasively broached by Hirst over twenty years ago; the active promotion, not least on the part of the state itself, of *politically recognised* associations ‘beyond’ and separate from the state; never has there been such a need for a turn towards a pluralized associational democracy as now when the response to big government is turning in such populist directions. But the point is not simply to vaunt the principle of democracy itself, simply for its own sake. As Hirst always argued, democracy is a formal device, one that does not necessarily guarantee ‘good’ decisions (Hirst 1997, p. 71; Hirst 1998). In the conceptual couplet of ‘associational democracy’ it is the associational part that is the important one, and democracy is the means of actualising it. The point of multiplying a plurality of political associations in civil society is, as Hirst insists, to spread and deepen political competition and bargaining. Here democracy is not really an end in itself or just a form of legitimation; it is as much an *instrument* that serves the cause of associationalism as much as associationalism being a vehicle for the extension of democracy beyond the state (Hirst 1997, pp. 28–59; Hirst 1993).

Voluntary Associations

Populisms have sometimes taken the form of ‘upscaled’ voluntary associations that turn moral demands into an oxymoronic ‘moral politics’ of *ressentiment*. For instance in the UK a very important precursor to UKIP (the UK Independence Party) was the Countryside Alliance, basically a pressure group for bloodsports enthusiasts embodying a moral conception of ‘country living’. But the existence of a genuine civil society in a political rather than just a moral sense presupposes a motley mixture of such associations; whereas populists, being generally anti-pluralist, seek to reduce all of these to a single logic, that of the people-as-one. Once the Countryside Alliance had morphed with other elements into UKIP it necessarily became a single-issue party with one end, namely Brexit, subsequently developing an agenda clearly based on the exclusion of constituencies regarded as alien to UK culture, most usually - if rather covertly - Muslims. Populists do not tend to ‘associate’ in a manner consonant with the development of a genuinely political civil society so much as cohere moralistically amongst themselves and exclude those they regard as other; they tend to make up moral groupings of *ressentiment* rather than, saliently, political ones. This of course is one reason why internet and social media culture is so fitting a shell for populist discourse of all sorts.

Often crucial in these sorts of tendency has been a conception of a lost constituency, a group that has been ‘left behind’ or left out altogether; and usually attached to this group is a kind of moral indexicality—this group has moral goodness attached to them; they are ‘hard working families’, those left behind, Rustbelt workers, or the ordinary, marginalised ‘people’, or even in more progressive varieties the ‘poor’ or the disadvantaged, the excluded. Of course, in contrast to nationalistic discourses, who the people *are* is never really specified except in cases where populism was not preceded by significant amounts of pluralised institutionalism in any case, such as Orban’s Hungary. Orban’s ‘people’ is clearly composed of Hungarians, Trumps of nativists, but what is Nigel Farage’s ‘people’ composed of exactly? In any case, this sense of the people, even if it is vague and completely un-defined, can seem to be the main ‘positive’ value that populisms have. But is that right?

The people, of course, is not in this sense an ‘association’ at all; rather it is a projected, largely hypothetical moral category. In fact the people is an almost entirely speculative, or at least rhetorical concept; since it is hardly clear who exactly the people are, it is usually defined against something else. In other words, far from being really a positive category the people is

an essentially negative concept; it is defined by what it opposes. For instance, the so-called British ‘people’ so often invoked as having ‘spoken’ over Brexit is surely only definable in the context of the EU itself; the British people are those who want to ‘take back control’. This is why so many populisms—UKIP itself being a good example—tend to fall apart once their demands are met. With the negation negated there is less definition of who the people actually are.

‘The’ people of course cannot be ‘represented’ but only, as it were, ‘signalled’ by rhetoric and, especially on the right (this is much less a phenomenon of the left), by embodied leadership. Many such populisms stress the role of leaders who embody their ideals rather than just espouse or articulate them in an ideational way. But, then, embodiment is not the same as representation in any case. Trump embodies the people but he does not exactly represent them, just as Orban embodies the Hungarians or Peron embodied the Argentinians—or at least some of them. Now, if, to use Villa’s rubric, political parties are voluntary associations that are importantly constitutive of civil society then populists do not like them; populist ‘parties’ are more like moral factions—single-issue groups (the single issue being the people-as-one)—than parties in the political sense. Political parties tend to group around coalitions of interests, causes and policies; they are entangled groupings, whereas populist factionalism entails—whether on the right or left—usually coercive normalisation and compulsory belonging.

Liberal democracies have typically used variants on the party system to focus debate and manage decisions: ‘parties that define clear political alternatives and act as a political check one upon the other’ (Hirst 1997, p. 172). However, there is clear evidence that mass parties with deep roots in civil society have been in substantial decline, at least in most Western liberal democratic states; and this may be another way of saying that civil society itself has been eroded (Mair 2013, p. 84). As Peter Mair emphasised, modern political parties tend to be set up as instruments of government rather than as crucibles of popular expression; and this too has resulted, no doubt by way of recoil, in a populist response. Populists often regard liberal democratic parties as centrist, dull, predictable, self-referential and managerialist, and basically concerned only with their own norms and interests. For populists, members of such parties are the Establishment, and in spite of the trumpeted differences of parties and so on they tend to hold that they are all actually in collusion with each other in what is really just a talking shop—parliamentary government, or in Britain simply *Westminster*. In contrast, perhaps we could indeed say that populist parties tend to be less like parties in the liberal sense than factions in the old sense, groups that represent as directly as possible specific interests. Often they tend to be more or less single-issue factions, such as UKIP in the UK; but although they do not extend their roots deep into civil society as such they do extend into particular pockets of society—they are more (and also less) than just instruments of government. Rather, they are something like moral collectives. In the UK, Corbyn’s Labour Party, for example, was always more like a pressure group movement than a prospective party of government; although progressively embedded as it became in the institutional environment of UK constitutional politics, Corbynism was partly able to adapt beyond a mere populism of mainly moral protest into what looked approximately like a genuine if certainly flawed political project. On the other hand, other populist movements have been less adaptable: whilst UKIP has roots in the countryside and in northern cities especially, it is struggling to adapt to the party-political realities that would orient it towards Westminster politics.

Political parties are not commonly held in the literature to be part of civil society because of on the one hand the typically moralised conceptions of civil society itself that have been predominant and, relatedly, because of the notion that ‘civil’ is a synonym for ‘peaceful’ -

whereas parties are seen as inherently confrontational. In contrast, indeed, to civil societies some have invoked the notion of incivility (Keane 1996). But civil society makes no sense unless it is seen in political terms, which is to say in terms of structured kinds of agonism; and, as we have emphasised, Tocqueville himself explicitly stated the crucial importance of political association in relation to associational tendencies generally (Tocqueville 2004, p. 604). Or at least we need to distinguish agonism from antagonism. For all the *frisson* of his famous analysis Carl Schmitt was surely wrong about liberal democracy in thinking that it represented a subversion of the essence of politics, an essence—for him—that is properly based on the friend-enemy distinction (Schmitt 1988, 2007). Instead of simply covering this distinction with the limp principle of ‘discussion’, the party system in liberal democracies sublimates it. Party conflicts entail a kind of redirection or translation of the state of civil war into formally peaceful yet still agonised terms, converting outright antagonism—ultimately, violence—into institutionalised agonism. Agonism, then, can be productive in the sense that it can be accomodating (cf. Hirschman 1994; and of course the work, more critically, of Chantal Mouffe).

In this sense agonism, far from being *uncivil*, is itself ‘civilising’. Populists discourses however very often tend to undo this formula because they tend to work on the principle of, as it were, attacking without engaging. Agonism does involve engagement, bargaining and arguing above all (Elster 2007, pp. 401–426). Populists often attack their opponents precisely on an antagonistic kind of friend-enemy principle; their opponents are indeed the enemies of the people-as-one, however (vaguely) defined in whichever context. But they tend not to engage in the sense of actually countering arguments with coherent programmes and policies; they tend to engage in rebuttal not deliberation, repudiation not negotiation, ranting and complaining not arguing and bargaining. Indeed whatever else they are, political parties on the liberal democratic model are indeed agencies of deliberation, negotiation, arguing and bargaining, whereas populist parties tend to be more like moral blocs or factions, and unless they are forced to engage with the institutional norms of the party system (as with Corbynism but unlike UKIP) they tend to be not just a symptom of the erosion of political civil society but corrosive of it.

If there is a solution to this issue it is in something obvious but difficult; the restoration of legitimacy to the representative apparatuses of liberal democracy. Fair enough, but difficult! (And of course populists themselves often make this point, if more usually in a moral than in a in a political way—“drain the swamp!” and so on.) But one way at least to start to rebuild that legitimacy would be not only to clean up the act of politicians and parties but, as Hirst insisted in his later political writings, to move away precisely from narrow parliamentary models of top-down parliamentary sovereignty (in the UK the so-called Westminster model) and to promote a pluralist range of stakeholding, participant, politicised associations in civil society (Hirst 1993).

Civil Associations

It is not uncommon to bemoan, in a moral-communitarian spirit, the decline of civil associations such as religious groups and clubs and societies that embody and generate ‘thick’ trust. As Gellner used to stress, thin-trust civil society is not just a characteristic feature of modern societies but a functional necessity for them (Gellner 1996). This domain, then, is characterised at a minimum by levels of trust and norm that make it possible as a site of interaction. It is a space of mutual recognition of quite a basic sort, where agents recognise each other as participants in if not a common project then something like a common game of interaction.

But, importantly, this is a loose, modular kind of structure; in order to function with a genuinely political presence civil society is less a space of absolute homogeneity than one of pluralism and difference within a loosely common framework.

In fact, precisely from the perspective of a desire to promote an actively functioning civil society, some of the decline of 'thicker' forms of association might be regarded as a good thing. Too much thick, communitarian belonging can lead to a kind of 'silo effect' entailing a sort of collective privatism. From the perspective of civil society, when we think about trust we might deploy the motto of 'not too little not too much' (see Williams 1995). Indeed, in so far as modern societies tend to rely on fairly thin but broad conceptions of trust, populisms tend to be antagonistic to this and indeed often take the form of, as it was, a speculative communitarianism—speculative in so far as there is no such thing as *the* people.

Nowhere is this truer today than on the internet of course. Tocqueville himself lauded the powers of media—newspaper—communication to bind forms of association in democracies. Newspapers attempted to persuade, and they prepared the ground for meaningful collective action (Tocqueville 2004, pp. 600–603). But in the era of the internet and social media the huge expansion—and ease—of communication allows not only for generalised communication but also for siloing tendencies, and for communication to be less about persuasion than spectacle. Instead of Tocqueville's kind of 'advisory' communication, any interaction there is tends to be antagonistic rather than agonistic, dictatorial rather than persuasive, performative rather than actually communicative or associational (cf. Tocqueville 2004, p. 600). Online groupuscules need only talk to each other in their silos, excluding moderating constituencies, on a model not of deliberation but simply of mutual reinforcement and less in terms of a habit of association than one of a kind of neo-tribalism; and then instead of testing their views on the outside in an associational way they simply dictate (usually in an antagonistic spirit) to the outside in terms of the certainties they claim to have reached. This means that instead of an open 'hoirizontal' public sphere of deliberation and discussion we have something like a multiple series of 'vertical' and highly moralized private spheres that constantly talk past each other and, when they do interact, doing so in a sort of antagonistic confrontation that is actually a form of *non-engagement* rather than political interaction.

Now, the public sphere is a notion that is formally separate from that of civil society but almost invariably bound to it in empirical terms (Habermas 1997). The two notions are bound together because for a civil society to exist there must be communication amongst its members, and this too is a matter of trust—that its members have common standards of truth-telling and interaction. Truthfulness is of the essence here. In particular, civil societies can only act as limiting buffers on the state if states tell the truth and if there is a free media able to seek out the truth if necessary against the state (see Williams 2002, Chapter 9). A vibrant civil society could not exist in a post-fact or post-truth culture.

The idea of a political public sphere tied to a homogeneous yet plural—political—civil society is radically challenged by the development of an antagonistic yet post-truth culture on the internet; with the factionalising of political discourse, and the mushrooming of diverse, multifarious and unsubstantiable information, the authority of truthfulness is itself under threat. But perhaps it is not that we live in a post-fact or post-truth society as such. Perhaps, it is rather that what counts as a fact has changed. For many—doubtless, not all—populist statements have truth value if they have a certain performative effect or if they signal what requires to be signalled - that is, the moral solidarity of the people. In other words, their statements do not necessarily need to be literally true, that is in a conventional or propositional sense. Take, for instance, this well-known quote from Donald Trump, on the campaign trail in 2015.

“I made a beautiful speech. I thought it was wonderful. Everything was fine. A week and a half later, they attacked me. In other words, they went through – and they lied. They made it up. I’m talking about illegal immigration. . . . We have to stop illegal immigration. We have to do it. We have to do it. Have to do it. And when I hear some of the people that I’m running against, including the Democrats, we have to build a wall, folks. We have to build a wall. All you have to do is go to Israel and say how your wall working? Walls work!” (quoted in Thompson 2016, pp. 77–78).

There is just about zero literal sense to any of this, but it works as a signalling device. Trump may or may not have been able to build a wall but that is scarcely the point. The point is that the excerpt signals his resolve, his practical sense of ‘getting things done’ on behalf of his people; the effect is not to state anything in particular but to infer that the audience knows what the speaker is saying even though he does not actually say it (ambiguity, meaningless repetition and space for semantic inference is a classic populist technique, whereas Fascist demagogues tended to spell things out), in other words, affirming the narcissistic identity of speaker and audience. But more importantly, it is a performance of the redundancy of mere language to capture the demands of the day; the message is that language is not enough, we need does not articulate speakers. The very inarticulacy of it is *performative*; it is demonstrating, signalling, the redundancy of mere speech, which means that the function of speech is not informative but simply *affective*. Truthfulness is, then, for most populisms of this kind a phenomenon of affect more than of denotation, or the mere facts—so in that sense as long as you are making the point you want to make, which the people all know (we have to leave the EU and ‘take back control’, we have to build a wall. . . .), the exact facts, the exact form of mere speech, mere talk, does not really matter.

Now, it will be said that not all populisms pursue this kind of discursive logic. This—and the outright, barefaced lie, memorably invoked by Theodor Adorno with regard to national socialism—is unquestionably a phenomenon largely of the right. But leftist populisms—in the UK the Corbyn variety was a good example—also rely, or have often relied, on effects of *redundancy*, of telling their audiences only what they already purport to know, often largely insulated from the wider communicative norms of political life, as those who have attended Labour Party constituency meetings over the past few years will know. The same is true of the kinds of extreme and intolerant, but purportedly leftist, identity politics increasingly in evidence on US and even UK campuses. The point is that such a narrowing of political discourse, and such a retreat from norms of truthfulness towards norms of affect and performativity, denunciation and name-calling, undermines the resilience of a political public sphere that would undergird civil society. It replaces agonistic politics with basically despotic – because putatively unanswerable – kinds of antagonistic morality. Of course, as for solutions, again it would be easy to be glib, beyond stating the necessity to cleanse political and other discourse from debased attitudes towards truth. This would certainly entail tightening up parliamentary and other regulations on political speech as well as taking steps further to regulate the internet. And again, Hirst’s argument for widening and extending institutional practices of democracy in an associational way is assuredly part of the solution. Electorates need to be political stakeholders in the truth not passive recipients of bribes dressed up as ‘facts’.

Redeeming Civil Society?

Populisms of just about whatever kind, then, can certainly be seen as, amongst many other things, potentially symptomatic of the corrosion of political civil society. So what, looking at the matter generally, happens now? The response on the part of those who are concerned for

the integrity of liberal democratic politics of a decent kind might consist of two emphases. First, a negative politics designed to short-circuit some of the mechanisms that lead to this state of affairs. This is a politics of refusal; for otherwise forces such as populism corrode everything else and the problem then goes well beyond mere populist movements themselves and into the political infrastructure itself. In fact, as briefly suggested at the beginning of these remarks, populism is really on the ‘spectrum’; there are populist *elements* inevitably—and often creditably!—in any liberal democracy and populism and democracy are indeed ‘shadows’ of each other. But catering to ideologically charged moralised populisms, what might be termed *reductive populism*, and especially those on the right, as so many otherwise centrist liberal and other politicians seem tempted to do, simply backfires. Adopting half-baked versions of populist language, taking backward steps in terms of pluralism and toleration are in not the way forward; they already concede too much even when conceding a little (Zielonka 2018). They are also symptoms of cowardice. No one really believes liberal politicians when they cater to such opportunism, and so everyone is discredited.

Second, and more positively, there needs to be not so much a *direct* re-assertion of the values of political civil society; that is really ‘willing what cannot be willed’, in Jon Elster’s terminology (Elster 1985). What would be required, rather, is more robust defence of the principles of liberal constitutionalism themselves. The idea of constitutional patriotism might certainly have some mileage here (Muller 2017). For another thing, there needs to be more emphasis on the fact that liberal democracies are in fact hybrids of democracy and liberalism. Both are important, yet they are different. Populists tend to emphasise only democracy—for which they tend to read majoritarianism or potential majoritarianism (which is not in fact necessarily *the* basic principle of democracy)—and to reject the liberalism element (toleration, representation and so on). And yet the liberalism element is more germane to the idea of a political civil society, for it is the liberalism element that emphasises the values of truthfulness, and the values of inclusivity and tolerance. Benjamin Constant saw that the majority is a constant problem for liberalism: ‘The rights of the citizens of individual freedom, religious freedom, freedom of opinion, which includes the freedom to express oneself openly, the enjoyment of property, a guarantee against all arbitrary power’ (Constant 2008, p. 180).

But liberalism these days—perhaps because of its unfortunate yet just about universal association with something actually quite different, namely a malign and reductive, indeed reactionary, *neoliberalism*—has a bad name with just about everyone about whom it is worth worrying whether one has a bad name and too much has been conceded to populisms of all sorts in allowing that there are such things as closed and malign elites and evil Establishments, and that representation itself is thereby intrinsically a negative externality of our political systems. Of course politicians and others do sometimes act in the manner of closed shops and vested interests, but very often populists are criticising not the abuse of the system but the very idea of representation—indirect power—itself. Political denunciation of establishments and elites is one thing; moral denunciation of the principle of indirect power itself is quite another.

At any event, legitimate parliamentary politics requires representation on the model not of directed envoys but genuine representatives who aim to speak for all not just their own support base; that is a basic liberal principle, one which is denied or at least challenged by many populisms, and also by anti-liberal discourses that hold the liberal consensus, such as it is, in contempt. Countering this sort of thing is not, however, a matter of invoking a substantive, ideological liberalism embodying unrealistic and usually self-serving—and hypocritical—

invocations of individual freedom, a non-invasive state and the sanctity of private life. It is more a matter of something akin to what the late Judith Shklar called ‘the liberalism of fear’, a basic, bottom-line constitutional liberalism owing more to Montesquieu than to Locke, Bentham or Mill and which emphasises above all else the delimitation and pluralisation of power (Shklar 1998; cf. Keane 1988). Without a basic rejuvenation of liberal principles of this very basic sort there can be no hope for a rejuvenation of political civil society at national level, which—likewise—means that hopes for a more civilised sense of common purpose at the international level are also likely to be moot. To redeem civil society entails addressing, above all, the crisis of liberalism.

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