FROM MOSES TO MAGGIE:
POPULAR POLITICAL WISDOM AND THE REPUBLICAN TRADITION IN POLITICAL THOUGHT

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Abstract

Popular political wisdom is often represented as a form of anti-politics, or Politikverdrossenheit, and therefore as detrimental to the health of the democratic political body. Recently, this negative interpretation of popular political wisdom has been revived in reaction to the growth of right-wing parties in Europe, who seem to be able to mobilise an uncanny, prejudiced and even racist public opinion. In this article, this negative interpretation is criticised as too one-sided. It overlooks the democratic implications of populism and the populist, redemptive aspects of democratic politics. In a mythical sense, the populist tradition starts with the originary redemptive politician Moses, and goes on until the present time. Its historical roots can be retraced to a republican conception of politics. The tradition of civic self-government, the concomitant notion of the dangers of political corruption, and the way to overcome this predicament as it was developed in the city-states of the Italian Renaissance, form the conceptual and practical framework in which the politics of populism could have developed at the end of the nineteenth century. Moreover, this framework structures up until today the strategy and rhetoric of politicians who try to pursue the anti-political politics of populism.

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Popular political wisdom is often represented as a form of anti-politics, or *Politikverdrossenheit*, and therefore as detrimental to the health of the democratic political body. Seymour Lipset presents one of the classic statements of this view in *Political Man*, arguing that working class life produces

> a tendency to view politics and personal relationships in black-and-white terms, a desire for immediate action, an impatience with talk and discussion, a lack of interest in organizations which have a long-range perspective, and a readiness to follow leaders who offer a demonological interpretation of the evil forces (either religious or political) which are conspiring against him (Lipset 1960, 115).

Recently, this negative interpretation of popular political wisdom has been revived in reaction to the growth of right-wing parties in Europe, who seem to be able to mobilise an uncanny, prejudiced and even racist public opinion. Many commentators explain the rise of these new parties, such as the Lega Nord in Italy, the Republikaner in Germany, the Front National in France, and the Vlaams Blok in Belgium as a result of the social exclusion of the "victims of modernisation." These parties are opposed against the political system as such, but more importantly against its ruling elites and opinion leaders. They are essentially populist parties, because they invoke the wisdom of the "simple folk" against the wisdom of policy makers and intellectuals. From this perspective, "populist parties are primarily interpreted as parties of discontent, which have managed to exploit voters' dissatisfaction and cynicism and to appeal to their sense of powerlessness by promoting strong authoritarian leadership" (Betz 1994, 38).

This negative interpretation of populist politics is too one-sided. Even when the support for right wing and authoritarian parties is mobilised by invoking the wisdom of the common people against the intellectuals or against the equality of all citizens, nevertheless populist politics does have a democratic element. It needs to be rescued, not only because people prone to populist sentiments may thus be saved for democracy. More importantly, populist politics informs us about important implications of the democratic ethos. As Margaret Canovan and others have argued, populism involves an appeal to democratic values that cannot be easily put down. Besides a pragmatic aspect of democracy as a peaceful way of settling deep-seated conflicts of interest by relying on the shared framework of the rule of law and parliamentary debate, democracy also has a redemptive side. It involves the transcendence of all conflicts and the creation of a true community of all citizens (Canovan 1999). The mobilisation of the people against the system, the elites and the intellectuals connects populism to this redemptive side of democracy.

Populism can thus be defined as a resistance against mediation and specialisation: it rejects all individuals, groups and institutions that claim to stand for, represent, translate, channel or otherwise mediate the popular will. This implies also the rejection of those people who have made politics into a profession: the modern politicians who emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. Populism is first and foremost opposed to a political division of labour; populist resentment is aimed primarily against political professionals (MacRae 1969, 159).

As a political movement, populism is therefore self-refuting, since its articulation requires always a measure of organisation, and consequently, of mediation and professionalisation. References to popular wisdom as an aspect of populist politics are never popular wisdom itself, but representations of it by populist leaders. Populist

politics therefore requires a delicate balancing-act: its actors need to represent the feelings and opinions of the people in such a way that it does not look like a representation, but like the thing itself.

In this article, I want to lay out the democratic implications of populist politics, by sketching the historical background of the politics of populism. I will argue there is a long legacy of populism. With some exaggeration, this tradition starts with the redemptive politician Moses, and goes on until the present time. As a preliminary reminder, however, it must be noticed that much of this legacy is as mythical as populist politics itself. The idea that this tradition culminates in the rule of Margaret Thatcher is mainly informed by the catchy alliteration it produces in the title of this article, even though Thatcher is an outstanding example of a populist politician. More importantly, the supposed beginnings of populism are also mythical. The art of populist representation of the popular will was developed, not in biblical times, but during the rise of mass politics at the end of the nineteenth century. At that time, a new kind of political leadership emerged out the words and deeds of new politicians like John Bright and W.E. Gladstone in the United Kingdom, and F. Domela Nieuwenhuis and Abraham Kuyper in the Netherlands. They all solved the populist predicament by creating their own originary myth, which veiled the superiority of their prominent political position and realigned them to the common people.

However, this rhetorical gesture is much older than the end of the nineteenth century. Its roots can be retraced to a much earlier *republican* conception of politics, or so I will argue. The tradition of civic self-government, the concomitant notion of the dangers of political corruption and the way to overcome this predicament, as it was developed in the city-states of the Italian Renaissance, forms the conceptual and practical framework in which the politics of populism could develop at the end of the nineteenth century. Moreover, this framework structures up until today the strategy and rhetoric of politicians who try to pursue the anti-political politics of populism.

My central argument, that populist resistance against political specialisation is an important ingredient of democracy, implies that populism is not necessarily a right-wing phenomenon. The contemporary domination of populist discourse by authoritarian and racist parties is therefore to be deplored. It undeservedly gives populism a bad name. Moreover, it denies left-wing parties access to the redemptive forces of democracy, and so weakens the appeal progressive politics might have. The friends of progress therefore have to reclaim the populist legacy.

Republican Politics

The republican tradition developing in the Italian and northern European city-states of the early modern period, was based on the idea of the city as an independent and self-governing body. At the end of the thirteenth century, cities like Florence, Venice and Pisa rejected the authority of the Holy Roman Empire. They developed a new republican political ideology to legitimate their self-rule. Practically, the independence of these cities was based on the economic power of the new elite, which earned much of their power through trade and newly developed industry (Baron 1939). Ideologically, their power was legitimated by a double conception of liberty. They claimed to stand in their right, not only because a self-governing city was the best guarantee against foreign oppression, but also because there the citizens were most free (see Bock, Skinner and Viroli 1990).

Although the wealth and liberty of the city was partly the result of the economic power of its citizens, the self-centred ambition of the new commercial elites was feared. To begin with, the city's external liberty depended on the ability and willingness to defend the city and to fight for the survival of the city, even at the cost of personal survival. A self-centred ambition was considered to undermine this patriotic motivation. Moreover, an excess of personal ambition could lead to civil discord, which disturbed the balance between social groups.

Nevertheless, some kind of social tension was considered inevitable and even desirable. In this connection, Niccolǒ Machiavelli, one of the main protagonist of the republican theory of politics, distinguished between different legitimate *umori* of social groups and dangerous sectional interests of family clans, or *sčtte*. The elite had a different psycho-political orientation than the people; the latter was only interested not to loose its liberty, while the former was always oriented towards an extension of its power. The art of politics in the city consisted in balancing these two orientations. The greatest danger, according to Machiavelli (and contrary to many of his contemporaries), was not the lack of political judgement on the part of the people, but the unrestrained ambition of the elite. The latter always tended to pursue sectional interest, and to pursue illegitimate factional interests (see Bock 1990; Price 1982; Brudney 1984). The thin line between respectable and sinister motivations, between *virtú* and *ambizione* was easily blurred. Therefore republicans first of all stressed the importance of political equality, in order to keep the ambitions of the elite in check. Secondly, they emphasised the relevance of publicity as a way to keep sinister interests out of the political realm.

However, the republican ideology of the Italian city-states was pessimistic. Considering the fragility of republican institutions and the seemingly inevitable downfall of republic, both of the historic examples of Athens, Sparta and especially Rome, and of their own Florentine republic after 1494, and after its reconstruction in 1498 again in 1512, this pessimism seemed warranted. A central component of the republican ideology was thus a theory of corruption. This involved a number of things. To begin with, corruption involved the use of public means for private ends: the sale or abuse of office, bribery of public officials, clientelism. Secondly, it involved the use of private, secretive or clandestine means to pursue both private and public ends: scheming, plotting, conspiring, both to obtain personal advantages and to contribute to political goals and institutional innovations — all contributed to the corruption of the polity. Not only the institutions itself were eroded as a result of this corruption; also the character of the citizen was corrupted by the abuse of power. Republicans thus objected both to interest politics and to the growth of a closed political class, who considered political institution as their private enterprise. Politics in the republican city had to be by everyone and for everyone (see Leonard 1984).

Republicans were also realists. They admitted that corruption had so far been inevitable. After a period of flourishing, invariably decay would follow. This called for a theory of political renewal, or *rinovazione*. When the relations between social classes had become deeply disturbed, and nobody was prepared any more to support the *res publica*, that is, to pursue the public good through public means, radical measures were necessary. At this point, republicans like Machiavelli introduced the notion of a "new prince": a leader, preferably from the outside, who through cunning and violence restored the republic to its former greatness. The success of the new prince depended on his ability to present himself as completely impartial. Machiavelli's advice

in *Il Principe* involved, as he said, both a look from the mountain into the valley and vice versa; it required a combination of the perspective of the elite and that of the people. As Hanna Pitkin (1999) has commented, the independence of the new prince was not only epistemological, but also ontological: the main examples of new princes were Solon, Lycurgus and Moses, who were all in a way god-like. Like Moses (and also like Jesus), the ideal new prince had no human ancestors, but came to the city as a baby floating down the river in a basket.[1]

At the same time, the new prince became immediately immersed in the power games of the city. He could confirm his power by harsh means, and "kill the sons of Brutus," after the founder Brutus who killed even his own sons to suppress the resistance to his seizure of power. But in the long run, the new prince had to create a more stable power base. In this respect, Machiavelli argued the prince had most to fear from the elite, and he proposed a privileged connection between the prince and the populace. He was convinced not only that the ambitions of the people were less dangerous, but also supported the idea of *vox populi, vox Dei*. In his opinion,

> *The populace is more prudent, more stable and of sounder judgment than the prince ... And if princes are superior to populaces in drawing up laws, codes of civil lives, statutes and new institutions, the populace is so superior in sustaining what has been instituted, that it indubitably adds to the glory of those who have instituted them* (Machiavelli 1521/1970, I.58).

To summarise, the republican ideology stressed the importance of citizen participation and was suspicious of the motives and actions of the political elite. It assumed politics was prone to corruption, which it interpreted as the intrusion of private interests in political life and the emergence of a class of people who came to consider politics, not as an occupation of all citizens alike, but as their private enterprise: as a profession, and no longer as a calling. The solution to this predicament was the coming of a new prince, with god-like characteristics, who would obliterate the whole corrupt polity. He would re-instate a healthy new polity in its place, which relied primarily on the support and the wisdom of the people.

Now, there is an obvious historical problem to argue that this line of thought is also applicable to the political life since the end of the nineteenth century, not only in Northern Italy, but also in much of the rest of the world. Still, that is what I am arguing. This is not the place to historically justify this bold assertion, only to point out that historical research, like John Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (1975) as well as my own study on the Netherlands *Zelfbestuur en staatsbeheer. Het politieke debat over burgerschap en rechtsstaat in de twintigste eeuw* (1993), suggests that political developments are structured by persistent political vocabularies, and that these vocabularies travel easily through space and time. This at least allows for the possibility that a conception of politics, developed in the city-states of early modernity, is still influential in the large-scale nation-states of high- and late modernity.

Mass Politics

The main reason for the revival of this republican line of thought at the end of the nineteenth century is the combination of the growth of a new industrial class and the extension of the suffrage, leading to new forms of political organisation. Surely, already before that time the power of elites was criticised, and the influence of commer-

cial interests on the polity deplored. As Pocock has argued, the struggle in England between the court and its circles of renters and the country of lesser influential (yet in no way lower class) outsiders, was structured by these arguments. Also the struggle in the Netherlands between the regents and their commercial interests, and the *stadholder* who sought the support of the common people in the late seventeenth and eighteenth century, involved arguments of corruption and renewal, especially when the Dutch republic seemed to stagnate at the hand of renters after 1700.

Yet the industrial and democratic revolutions of the second half of the nineteenth century introduced a new dimension in this area. They created a new class of people, who struggled to survive under the new economic pressure, and at the same time were confronted with a substantial minority of people who disproportionally profited from the newly created wealth. In the countries where the first explicitly populist movements emerged, the United States and Russia of the mid-nineteenth century, this new class division was also a division between farmers and the new urban elites.

Especially after the Civil War, American pioneers in the Great Plains had great difficulties to earn a living. The spectacular increase in agricultural production resulted in an absolute growth in income, yet compared to the urban population and also to the large agricultural companies that soon came to dominate the West, the rise in income was relatively low. Moreover, this modest increase in income was bought at the price of extreme (self)exploitation, often ending in disaster, especially after not only the prices of agricultural products, but also the price of silver, and thus the monetary value of silver coins was falling. Bankrupt small farmers joined with lower-class city dwellers, both fearsome of an international conspiracy of bankers (quite like the anti-Semitic oriented fears against bankers in Europe) and opposing the power of large landholders, monopolists and other fat cats.

As Michael Kazin has argued, the attitude of the American populists towards the state has always been ambiguous. On the one hand, they fought for social reforms to protect their interests, yet at the same time distrusted also the monopoly of the state and its officials. Until the 1930s, populist backed the leftist social reform, resulting in the New Deal. After that time, Kazin argues, populism shifted to the right, and became mainly a conservative and often bigoted movement protesting against the state and the liberal elite, thus robbing the left of a grass roots power base.[2]

Also in Europe, populism was on the rise at the end of the nineteenth century. Contrary to the development in the United States, where the defeat of populism around 1900 led to a disenfranchisement of blacks and a blockade to electoral participation of lower class whites, the development of populism in England and also in the Netherlands was closely connected with the struggle for the extension of the suffrage. This created tensions between the lower class constituency of the newly emerging political parties and its leadership, that were resolved, although not always completely obliterated, by the rhetorical strategies of populism.

The tension was partly the result of the logic of organisation. All popular parties established in the second half of the nineteenth century with the aim to increase the equality between social groups were subject to the law of oligarchisation, which Robert Michels had developed on the basis of his study of the German Socialist Party (see Michels 1911/1925). But the development of a new class of political professionals was further complicated as a result of the often-occurring social distance between the members and the leaders of the movement. For instance, British "popular liberalism"

connected radical members of the middle classes and activists of the lower classes by invoking an image of an utterly corrupt aristocracy. Yet many of its leaders were itself closely connected to the ruling classes, like Gladstone, the "people's William," born as the son of a wealthy Liverpudlian slave owner and trained at Eton and Oxford (Biagini 1992, 379).

Invoking the image of a corrupt political and economic elite, the populist leaders of the end of the nineteen still had to bridge the gap between themselves and their constituency in order to become the "new prince." Parallel to the god-like image of the republican founder and his apparent lack of an ancestral past or social ties, populist leadership was based on two mechanisms, a first one religious, the second biographical, both connected by the often central biographical event of a conversion, leading to a radical break with the past.

Religion played a dominant role in nineteenth century populism. In England, there was a close connection between the critique of aristocracy, millenarianist Nonconformity, and the idea that the movement and its leaders had some kind of religious mission. The Bible offered the vocabulary and imagery of an egalitarian ideology, and pointed to a utopia in which illegitimate social distinctions were gone: "There were not two nations of the ancient Jews and there should be no great cleavage among Englishmen" (Jospeh Ashbey quoted in Biagini 1992, 37). Also in the Netherlands, biblical speech was commonly used by populist leaders, not only of the Calvinist "anti-revolutionary party" of Abraham Kuyper, but also by socialist leaders. Most of these leaders legitimated their prominent position by referring to a high calling. "I know that it is the hand of the Lord of Hosts which led me that day; that the Almighty Maker of heaven and earth raised me up to do this particular thing," argued the British trade unionist Joseph Arch. In the same vein, the Dutch early socialist Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis took example by the life of Jesus, and scorned the "mediocre men" who considered the man inspired by great principles to be insane. He was obviously talking about his own difficulties when he observed: "As every other time, also ours has its prophets, yet as always one tries to strangle their voice" (Nieuwenhuis 1903).

This religious aspect was connected with the biographical, through the often invoked instance of a conversion as the beginning of a political career (see de Roy 1999). In the case of Nieuwenhuis, this was a complex issue, since he was a Lutheran priest, and rejected his Christian calling in order to become a socialist, and later on an anarchist. In a novelised representation of this event, Nieuwenhuis had lost everything but his conviction after had preached to his community for the last time in September 1879: "No pulpit, no flock, *no past*" (Zandstra 1968, 110). But exactly this decisive break with the past prepared him to serve the people, whom he trusted more than anything else: "Our power is in the people, it is our only chance for success" (Nieuwenhuis 1982, 209).

Also the Calvinist political leader Abraham Kuyper went through a kind of conversion. As Nieuwenhuis, he was a priest, and started his political career, not by leaving the Reformed Church altogether, but by joining the orthodox reformists who objected to the upper-class bias and lack of piety of the church leaders. He presented his conversion in an autobiographical *Confession* (1873) as the result of long talks with the members of his flock in the community of Beesd, where he was stationed in the 1860s. Especially the conversation with community member Pietje Baltus acquired mythical

proportions. This illiterate woman made him aware of the simple truth of sin and grace: "In the simple folk of this backward village Kuyper rediscovered Calvin, ages after the great teacher was put to rest," argued the leading Dutch anti-revolutionary politician of the 1930s Colijn. In Beesd, another commentator argued, "he held his hand in the untainted source of that old popular force" (quoted in Puchinger 1987, 209-11).

The same spiritual connection with the religious wisdom of the common folk was said to have inspired John Bright. He always stressed the fact that he had a popular background, yet even though his parents came from poor families, his father had made a modest fortune at the time John Bright was born. Bright stressed his Quaker creed, which taught him the egalitarian outlook for which he fought as a politician. Also for Bright, this religious insight was not a matter of the mind. As his biographer Robertson put in verse: "Taught by no priests but by their beating hearts/ ... in the silent bodily presence feel/ The mystic stirrings of a common life, which make the many one" (quoted in Joyce 1994, 95; see also Joyce 1991).

The most remarkable example of a "new prince" making a connection with the common people was given by William Gladstone. As already said, he came from a well-to-do family, yet managed to present himself as the champion of the working classes. Already in the 1860s he had a prominent position in the Liberal party. However, it was only after he had resigned from the Liberal leadership in the middle of the 1870s that he acquired his name of a mesmerising politician, whose was able to "Gladstonise" the crowd, as it was called at the time. The reversal of his political fortune came at a moment when Gladstone was already in his sixties. His "heart's desire has been for that rest from conflict and from turmoil which seems almost a necessity for a soul that would be prepared in time to meet its God for eternity." The fact that he still had received the strength to pursue his famous Midlothian campaign of over thirty speeches in two weeks, convinced him of godly intervention: "For when have I seen so strongly the relation between my public duties and the primary purposes for which God made and Christ redeemed the world?" (quoted in Clarke 1991, 29).

This religious inspiration also transpired in his rhetoric, which was as biblical and chiliastic as that of Bright and other British populist.

Yet Gladstone not only re-invented himself through religious means. He also overcame his upper-class background and connected to the people by enacting his own biography of a plain main. He stimulated the newspapers not only the write about his speeches, but also about his personal life and his rustic homestead at Hawarden, where he devoted his time to his hobby of chopping down trees. The image of the man "in his shirt sleeves, his braces thrown off, and his arms bare, lustily at work upon a giant tree" much contributed to his image as a champion of the working class and to the cult of the leader, so much that even excursions were organised to see Gladstone felling a tree. As Biagini commented, this imagery of the woodsman was intimately related to a biblical iconology of the axe already lying at the root of the unfertile tree (Matthew 3.10), thus connecting many of the elements which legitimated the seizure of power by a "new prince" at the end of the nineteenth century (Biagini 1992, 395-405).

It would be a mistake to think this was only rhetoric, and to assume that actual politics was about something altogether different. Gladstone posing as a worker also expressed his idea that the vigorous virtues were the foundation and goal of all political action. The main concept at the time was character, the independent thought and action of the strong and bold man. While in earlier decades the pinnacle of virtue was represented by the upper classes, and the lower classes were considered to be immod-

erate and lustful, in Bright's and Gladstone's age "character" became in the first place a characteristic of the pious worker (Collini 1991, Ch. 3). Yet character functioned also in a different way: as the self-invented role in the narrative of politicians presenting themselves as the leaders of the working classes, as the voice of the people. And, since they believed in the idea of *vox populi, vox Dei*, their character in the political play was that of the god-send leader, overcoming the divisions of class and uniting the nation (see Joyce 1995, 213-221).

Populist Politics

Populism has never disappeared since the end of the nineteenth century. In all countries of the modern world, politicians have claimed to have a direct connection with the people and rejected the rule of an aristocracy, hereditary or otherwise. Sometimes this criticism was also applied to the new mediating class of political representatives in parliament. This led to a shift in political orientation of populism. While the criticism of a self-serving elite was for a long time a left-wing affair, its application in the first decades of our century to parliamentary politicians and state officials changed it into right-wing cause. Soon populism came to be equated with authoritarianism and fascism, and still it has a bad ring (see Fritzsche 1990). Most studies on populism of the recent decades deal with either right-wing extremism or Latin American politics, and treat it as a pathological and dangerous fruit of misguided modernisation (see Betz 1994; Rubin 1987).

As Kazin argued, there is also a strong populist undercurrent in the less extremist right-wing parties in America; and the same may be observed in Britain and on the Continent. The current populism still exhibits much of the same traits as before, and remains connected to the classical republican ideology. Yet again, some new elements have now entered the image. The main concern of populist politicians is now not the aristocracy, the renters, or the established interests of the bourgeoisie. After the state responded to many of the populist demands for curtailing the corrupting effects of commerce and the free market, the result has been an increasingly dominant state. The new elite is no longer a social elite, but a political and managerial elite; and the populist critique is now much more aimed against the state than anything else is.

A good example of this line of thought is the politics of Reagan and especially Margaret Thatcher. She made a career out of bashing the "nanny state," and came a long way in here attempt to roll back the state. This is not the place to discuss the politics of Thatcherism. What is remarkable, however, is that Thatcher revived some of the central concepts of nineteenth century progressive populism, and used them for what was now a right-wing cause. The main element was her stress on "character" and the vigorous virtues. This led her "to emphasise the unrealised potentials of the ordinary, robust British citizen rather than the unremediable disabilities of the least favoured members of society" (Letwin 1992, 34). It also led her to oppose many of the political establishment, who were considered to fall short on the Thatcher's test of vigour, either because they pampered the populace, or because the were effeminate themselves.

The idea that Thatcher revived the republican conception of politics is not only suggested by her criticism of the political system as such, her anti-establishment rhetoric, and her strongly gendered notions of politics, but also by her presentation as a new prince. She presented herself as an outstanding example of these vigorous vir-

tues, and in her autobiography she once again confirmed that she was, like her father, a hard-working and devout person of principles. She often referred to the plain wisdom stemming from the fact that she was a grocer's daughter, and claimed to have learned already at an early age that "one can never do without straightforward common sense in matters small as well as great" (Thatcher 1995, 31).

Thatcher's populist rhetoric can be retraced to the republican tradition. It stresses the corruption of the political class, at the same time as it glorifies the purity of both the normal people, as well as the political leader. As the self-representation of a populist leader like Margaret Thatcher suggests, this purity is often constructed in terms of a lower-(middle-)class background. The most important aspect of populist politics is that its leaders always stress that they do not belong to the political class.

The antagonism against the political class is most clearly exemplified by the revival of right-wing populism in Dutch politics in the second half of the 1970s — even before the rise of Thatcherism. At the time, conservative liberals, Christian democrats and even some rightist social democrats began to protest against what soon was labelled a neo-democratic elite. By this, they targeted new members of the expanding state bureaucracy, often employed in the soft sector of community work, social relief and psychological care, and their intellectual supporters in education, universities and the mass media. They were accused of hypocrisy, as they were claiming to promote the independence and the self-consciousness of their clients, yet served their own interests best, by identifying ever more needs and social problems only professionals could solve. As a result, so the argument continued, the common people began to think the state had the solution to all their problems, while the state budget was unevenly usurped by the new leisure class of progressive intellectuals and social workers.

The campaign to roll back the welfare state had its origin in this anti-elitist discourse, which clearly invoked many of the elements of populism mentioned before: the corruption of the people by a malicious elite, the abuse of public funds and means for private gain. Another populist element was the argument that state had to be reoriented to the actual needs of the people, often defined as the desire not to be bothered by priggish officials and the aversion against paying high taxes for unwanted services. Even the call for a new prince was voiced, at least in the negative: as a result of the new welfare state elite, parliamentary democracy was said to be overloaded by the demands of an ever increasing number of interest groups. Politicians were advised to give in less to these demands, and to point to the fact "the Hague [the seat of government] is not a giant supermarket with no checkout," as one of the founders of the Christian democratic party argued. This insight "was not political;" it had to come "out of the hearts of the common people" (Steenkamp 1976). Dutch populism of the 1970s thus reproduced the paradox identified above, i.e. the appeal to return to the wisdom and needs of the common people on the one hand, and the urge on politicians to distance themselves from the corrupt desires of the polity and to reinstate a new and sound vision of public and private responsibility.

Reclaiming Populism

Populism is now viewed mainly as a right-wing phenomenon, closely related to authoritarianism and political resentment. This has not always been the case. Actually, late nineteenth-century populism clearly had a progressive taint. Also in later periods, populism remained the style of progressivism. For instance, it is hard to im-

agine the American civil rights movement, without its populist characteristics. Also the movement for democratic renewal in Europe and the United States at the end of the 1960s and in the 1970s was based on the idea that democracy should be more than a prudential decision mechanism; it had to reach the hearts and souls of the citizens to be a veritable expression of the popular will. However, it was the same elite that aimed at reforming democracy, and raising the awareness of the people to contribute to this invigorated democracy, that stood at the beginning of an estrangement between populism and political progressivism. Increasingly, left-wing politicians were depicted as being out of tune with the spirit of the times, and to be unable to hear the true voice of the people. Moreover, they were accused of corrupting the people and using them to further their own benefit. The schism between populism and progressive politics became even wider, when right wing and racist politicians successfully mobilised the imagery of a conflict between the common people and welfare state elites. Increasingly, the common people came to be viewed, not as the natural constituency of progressive parties, but as a potential threat to the electoral power and the long-term goals of progressive parties.

Of course, there is still a much more complicated story to tell here. One of the reason, at least in Western Europe, for the break between populism and progressivism, is the changing meaning of the labour class in political alignments: as a result of the changing economic landscape, the left had to be looking for other constituencies. Another important fact is indeed the expansion of the state. Even though it expanded as much under right-wing government as it did under the progressive rule, only the latter had such a strong ideological commitment to it. As a result, the left paid most of the price, when the state began to perceived as part of the problem, rather than the solution of the problems of the common people.

Be that as it may, it still remains important to reclaim populism for progressive political ends. When one remains focused on the right-wing character of the current populist rhetoric, it is difficult to see that the critique of specialisation in politics has always been an aspect of democratic politics. It took the left perhaps too much time to understand that by rejecting the right-wing critique on the state, it also lost much of the ability to formulate an alternative conception of politics. As a result, the left has wandered between an unreflected grass roots notion of direct democracy, and an elitist and etatist rejection of popular politics.

Notes:

1. The gendered subtext in this story is that the prince's independence is primarely construed as an independence from women, while the political struggle in the city, in which the prince has to intervene is represented by Fortune, also a woman figure.

2. Kazin 1995. The literature on American populism is almost endless. See also Goodwyn 1978, Hackney 1971, Hofstadter 1969.

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