Populism
Comments on a Democratic Desire

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Willem Schinkel, sociologist at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam, does not consider populism a threat to democracy. According to him, populism in fact especially has significance as a means of criticism, now that 'democracy is so little criticized that every dictator holds elections in order to adorn himself with democratic attire'.

Populism includes the desire to replace political representation with the presence of a presumed people. Populist desire is the desire to replace the fundamental absence that characterizes democracy with presence. Such a presence, which is still democratically mediated, is only possible in a manner comparable to actually existing socialism, through a party or person that is, in every way, the culmination or embodiment of the people. It is therefore no coincidence that populism often champions assimilationism. Only for a perfectly assimilated people can absence nevertheless guarantee presence, and indeed via the medium of a party or person who embodies the people in a one-to-one representation.

Although pop art does not have such a mimetic pretension, political populism can be compared to it in a sense. Both populism and pop art have a fascination for the readymade. Moreover, both have a preference for repetition, and they share a mass consciousness and a representation fetish in which the same thing is continually reconfirmed. Warhol's silkscreens make it clear what such repetition leads to. They represent boredom with the object and an attendant alienation from the subject. The repetition of the object brings with it a loss of meaning, and the obsession with its confirmation is precisely what results in that loss. The trauma of the desire for the absent, which has always been at the bottom of the obsession with presence and representation, comes to the surface, and the meaningless surface is generalized at the expense of a loss of indepth experience. Warhol's melancholy is highly comparable with populist melancholy. But that melancholy is simultaneously the existential dimension of modern democracy. Democracy is characterized by an empty position, an interval. Democracy is a peripheral phenomenon: it occurs on the periphery of a 'between', a fundamental difference, an absence. It is the embodiment of a paradox, taking place between the apparent opposites of presence and representation. It reconciles 'the people', conceived as universal within political boundaries, with their particular representatives.

The 'gulf between the citizen and politics' that respectable political scientists and political philosophers problematize is therefore fundamental to the functioning of a modern democracy. The democratic ideology is one of delegation and representation, of the replacement of a presence (the people, the embodiment of the universal within democracy) by a representation (the representatives of the people, the embodiment of the particular, the derived). And the legitimacy rituals of democratic politics, the elections, revolve around that replacement. Democracy initiates an absence and sets up a politics that preoccupies itself with the correct replacement of that absence. Elections first and foremost

thematicize the correctness of the mediation, the fit between absent presence and present representation. Democracy is first of all about mediation, and only secondly about goals. As a result, it is constantly in danger of becoming a narcissistically inflated mock game of popular representation (mediation), even when long-term poltical outlooks (goals) are expected to safeguard the survival of 'the people'.

Democracy is thus a game of mediation. It is the most formidable mass medium of modern times. Because democracy claims a correct reflection of 'the people', and thus a procedurally correct mediation, it incites a constant desire for immediacy. I purposely say 'desire', because the presupposition of a presence ('the people'), is what first of all operates here, with 'the people' further remaining a virtual but political category [1] – always present in absence, always having a presence on the grounds of claimed representation. 'The people' remain the *focus imaginarius* of democracy; and particularly during elections, when they are expected to speak, 'the people' disappoint themselves because they prove not to be a unity. As such, populism is in fact the most fundamental form of the democratic desire for immediacy. Hence the populist selectivity as to who really is one of 'the people': immediacy is only possible where no difference needs to be mediated. And hence the populist emphasis on immediate action, on seizing the moment, decisiveness. That immediacy, however, is fundamental to the paradox of democracy, which can only combine presence and representation because of the presupposition of a procedurally correct transition, a mediation that indeed condenses 'the people' through popular representation, but loses nothing of the quality and potential of 'the people' in the process – for doesn't that guarantee lie within 'the people' themselves? Populism thus considers the indirect way of democracy to be a problem, and seeks a more direct way via the medium of charisma, plain language and decisiveness.

Populism: The Democratic Desire

But populism is not a phenomenon that is external to democracy and threatens it. Not only has populism become a standard trope in regular politics, the populist desire is actually the most democratic of desires. [2] Democracy is based on an absence that it must ignore, and it simultaneously rests on a desire that it must suppress. The desire for overlap, for a perfect match between a presupposed but never actualized presence ('the people') and a representation (representatives of 'the people'), is ultimately democratic, but at the same time ultimately threatening for a democracy that exists by virtue of the claim that it realizes this match, and the simultaneous impossibility and even undesirability of doing so. This is why Jacques Rancière can argue that the duality of democracy consists of the fact that 'there is only one good democracy, the one that represses the catastrophe of democratic civilization'. [3] The duality of democracy is responsible for the populist desire. The gap that is opened between the (particular) representation of 'the people', and 'the people', imagined as universal within political-demographic boundaries, nourishes a desire to bridge that gap. This desire is ultimately democratic because it epitomizes the most perfect essence of democratic ideology. And at the same time it undermines democracy because it attempts to fill the void that is essential for the functioning of democracy. As such, populism contains a reference to 'the-people-as-one-part', pictured as excluded or unheard, and 'the-people-as-a-whole', the embodiment of democratic authority. [4] At the same time, 'populism' is an all-too-easy reproach aimed at a politics wishing to legitimize itself – a reproach that simultaneously excommunicates large sections of 'the people' from the democratic community. Political legitimacy in democracy is often a double bind: when democracy meets the populist desire, it is always in danger of losing its distance, its 'between' character, with the resulting charge of populism. On the other hand, when populist legitimacy is lacking, the same critics can point to the 'gap between the citizen and politics', to which they then unjustly ascribe only negative characteristics.

Modern democracies have found a way of dealing with the duality that, as it were bridging the two shores of a void, characterizes them, by sublimating that duality. They have copied

the difference between the governing (politicians) and the governed ('the people') within politics itself. [5] The political arena also includes the governing (the government) and the governed (the opposition). This deflects the populist desire to a less harmful preoccupation with the political arena and its contingent players. 'The people' generally are more concerned with the spectacle between the government and the opposition than with their own condition as a sovereign people governed by politics as a whole (the government and the opposition). Populism does not escape that sublimation, however. A desire for unity and the reconciling of the democratic duality cannot be captured by duplicating that duality. In that sense, populism is a – not harmless – mnemonic technique of the democratic political system itself. It reminds democracy of its original promise.

The Duality of the *Populus:* Person versus Citizen

Democracy's duality, its intervallic nature that holds particularism in a precarious balance with universalism, can also be found in the modern concepts of 'citizen' and 'the people'. These, too, are characterized by a fundamental dualism of particularism and universalism. A person who is a 'citizen' is always pictured as part of a collective. The citizen is never really an individual, for the collective is precisely what guarantees his or her status as a citizen. The modern concept of 'citizenship' could mask this by defining individual rights and duties as characteristic of the citizen. But this made it clear that the modern concept of 'personhood' contains a duality. It compromises between particularism and universalism. The individual has universal and inalienable rights, but only in so far as, and as long as, he or she is a 'citizen'. This duality is necessary in order to guarantee individuality. Only the universal individual is truly 'in-dividual', one and indivisible, with a singular value. Every private individual derives singularity from universality. Nonetheless, the citizen is bound by blood ties (*jus sanguinis*) and geographic boundaries (*jus soli*).

Something similar is true for the modern concept of 'the people'. That notion also has a long tradition of duality, going back far before modern times. On the one hand, 'the people' are the *populus*, the ruling part of the population, which for example formed the Roman Senate in combination with the patricians. On the other hand, 'the people' in the sense of 'the common people' are all of the subjects of the state. The term can mean 'the society' as opposed to 'politics' ('the state'). It can also refer to all people within a political context. In the populist variant, it often refers to those who 'really' are 'of the people'. And it can also refer to all people in general. Thus it was possible for the American *Declaration of Independence*, with its 'we, the people', to be a declaration made by a small club of regents on behalf of the whole of a geographically bounded population, with the nature and rights of human beings in general as its legitimization. And in 1989, the universalist rallying cry of 'Wir sind das Volk' could turn into the particularist 'Wir sind ein Volk' – paradoxically enough with the demolishing of a wall. The Dutch concept of *volk* also has such a more ethnic-nationalistic character, but the contrast between the 'the people' and the elite makes it clear that this is not necessarily always the case.

Boundaries are nevertheless fundamental to 'the people'. 'The people' are located within a certain territory (a fact that gave rise to the popularity of political geography in the nineteenth century). Consequently, every socialism has until now been a national socialism. And to this day, particular state communities in which geographic boundaries are crucial are legitimized on the basis of universal portrayals of humankind, such as the Enlightenment. As Rancière has argued, the universal portrayal of humankind can serve to legitimize the spread of 'democracy' abroad, while mass protests and popular culture at home are subject to political criticism and suppression. These days 'the people' might be even more strongly localized than ever, now that 'the people in the city neighbourhoods' are coming into view as the new incarnation of 'the common people'. 'The people' who populate democracy, the *demos* that is generally thought of as *ethnos*, exist in a kind of limbo, a 'between' condition, between particularism and universalism. If nothing else, that 'betweenness' arises from the paradoxical duality between 'person' and 'citizen' that has

been an explicit part of (at least) Western political culture ever since the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*. [6]

Populist Desire and the Democratic Ideology

Dualities of this sort endow the democratic political system with a great measure of complexity. The productive aspect of a paradox is the possibility of holding two seemingly opposite positions. Such paradoxes can be made plausible through temporalization: by doing one thing first and then the other, but never doing both simultaneously. During rituals of legitimization such as elections, the central focus is the overlap between 'the people' and their representatives; after the elections, it turns to watery compromise and procedural distance as regards 'the people'. The populist desire springs from the constant tension that exists between presence and representation, 'the people' and their representatives, absence and presence, universalism and particularism. It is an extremely conciliatory desire, one that won't stand for the procedural and sublimated forms of conciliation that are the garb of democracy. It reminds democracy of a promise, but also always threatens to make it painfully clear that the democratic promise implies an *à venir*, that the promise can never be redeemed and thus must remain a promise.

What the populist desire and democratic ideology moreover have in common is a presupposition of 'the people', with all of the dualities this entails. But in democracy, the definition of the *demos* is at stake: democracy involves the rule over a *demos* that is resultant of that rule. The political constitution of democracy is the institution of 'the people'. Democracy is a mass medium, but also a cybernetic machine, full of feedback, performativity and strange loops. 'The people', as the collective assumption of populist desire and democratic ideology, are never the presence they are assumed to be. They are a public that must always be assembled anew – a public that always claims to precede democracy. But the ultimate legitimacy of democracy lies precisely in the claim that 'the people' exist prior to democracy. Therefore the populist desire, which shares that claim, does not fundamentally threaten democracy. On the contrary, it contributes to the plausibility of the primordiality of 'the people'.

Democracy is helped by a similar mechanistic scheme of cause ('the people') and effect (poplular representation). Its survival is based on the denial of the fact that 'the people' are a feedback effect of its performance, combined with the mass media production of views, opinions and preferences that make transparent what is presumed to have existed all along. It is clear that 'the people', as a political collective that consumes its own views in the form of 'opinion polls', is a temporal and spatial effect of legitimizing rituals such as elections. When a populist desire shines through in this, the idea that it threatens democracy is itself a contribution to a democratic ideology that is blind to the threats that it holds for human life. The populist desire is evoked by democracy itself, but it has a real purpose: it reminds democracy of the fact that it is a promise and keeps the necessity of alternative directions on standby. Should populism, in its practical model, threaten democracy, it is therefore only because democracy is complex enough to threaten itself. Such a threat can be seen positively, as a political mnemonic technique, which in a time of radical depoliticization is a reminder of the political. In the midst of all the differences of opinion, of debates about percentages of consumer purchasing power or greater or lesser amounts of carbon dioxide, 'democracy' seems to have become an ultimately depoliticized but nonetheless hegemonial concept that is so little criticized that every dictator holds elections in order to adorn himself with democratic attire. In such a time, the populist desire is perhaps one of the few critical effects that democracy can call into being for itself.

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Footnotes

1. See: Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 224.
2. See: Rudi Laermans, 'Framing the Sovereignty of the "Democratic State" Sociologically: Reflections on the Political System, Contemporary Populism and Democracy', in: Willem Schinkel, *Globalization and the State: Sociological Perspectives on the State of the State* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 83-105.
3. Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2006), 4.
4. See: Margaret Canovan, *The People* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 65-90.
5. See: Niklas Luhmann, *Die Politik der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt a / M: Suhrkamp, 2000), 97 et seq.
6. See: Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sace:. Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Willem Schinkel, 'Na de mens en de burger: de eigenlijk-nog-geen-echte-burger. Over cladogrammaticale atletiek en sociale immuniteit', *Krisis: Tijdschrift voor actuele filosofie*, no. 3 (2009), 39-51./p>

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