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Populism and Free Speech

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Populism and Free Speech

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*This is true liberty when free-born men/Having to advise the public may speak free/ ... What can be juster in a State than this?*²
Euripides (423 BC)

“Populism” is among the many elastic terms in media and academic discourse. It refers to diverse collective actions extending across the left/right political spectrum, sometimes including other dimensions such as religious, ethnic or environmental.³ Its use as epithet to discredit dissent or justify suppressing dissent is increasing. This obscures the importance of populism in historical processes through which freedoms and rights we enjoy were established.

The term is applied also to collective actions aimed at renewing discrimination against women,⁴ visible minorities or other groups who gained freedoms and rights more recently, or at curtailing speech. These often are induced⁵ by wealthy or otherwise powerful persons or groups through methods such as patronage, or propaganda masking private political gain as common good.⁶

The Term and the Phenomena

In a 2013 essay, “Populism and the New Oligarchy”, Marco D’Eramo noted various efforts by scholars to define populism have been frustrated by the variety of populist

¹ Jon Thompson is Professor Emeritus at the University of New Brunswick.

² Euripides, *The Suppliants*, 437-440, translated by John Milton to preface his essay *Areopagitica* in 1644, <http://intersci.ss.uci.edu/wiki/eBooks/BOOKS/Milton/Areopagitica%20Milton.pdf>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/may/24/schoolchildren-go-on-strike-across-world-over-climate-crisis>

⁴ <https://www.macleans.ca/politics/how-canadas-growing-anti-abortion-movement-plans-to-swing-the-next-federal-election/>

⁵ Instructive commentary can be found in a 2013 article posted at rewire.news, explaining among other things that: “If you want to promote a pro-corporate agenda, you’re only going to get so far,” Sue Sturgis, the Durham, North Carolina-based editorial director of the progressive website Facing South, told *Rewire*. “But when you start weaving in these social issues like abortion and other reproductive rights issues, then you’re gonna appeal to a broader range of people, and a very motivated voting bloc. They will turn out. So it serves your larger cause.” (Link included in this CFE Blog post.)

⁶ <https://rewire.news/article/2013/11/05/anatomy-of-the-war-on-women-how-the-koch-brothers-are-funding-the-anti-choice-agenda/>

phenomena. He cited attempts: “no one can define it,” or it is “a series of discursive resources,” or it is “a political style.”⁷

A few examples illustrate political diversity: Theresa May was called a right-wing populist leader because aspects of her style were found to resemble those of Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán and others widely regarded as such;⁸ the *Gilets jaunes* constitute “a leaderless grassroots populist movement” that is neither left nor right⁹ and opposes the neoliberal policies of Emmanuel Macron;¹⁰ the commune movement in Venezuela that began with encouragement by the government of left-wing populist Hugo Chávez and continues, although some communes no longer have the same political affiliation.¹¹

Despite definitional uncertainty regarding populism, various political phenomena may have one or more common features. A feature of many collective actions is solidarity, “people coming together around known goals.”¹² The instances of populism mentioned here have this identifiable feature, whether they involve political parties, factions, movements or less-structured groups.

For D’Eramo, the term populism is modern when used with positive connotations: in earlier times “not only populists but the people themselves were an object of contempt.” He concluded favourable views of populism depended on favourable conceptions of “the people.” But he also found “systematic use of the term populism is a post-war phenomenon,” and one increasingly applied with negative connotations regarding the participants. His data showed also that the numbers of publications discussing populism grew much more rapidly from the 1980s onward.

Thus, there were two post-war phases: gradual growth in numbers of publications on populism until the 1980s, with rapid growth thereafter. D’Eramo’s explanation for the two-phase pattern may be paraphrased as follows. The early post-war decades were strongly influenced by rivalry between Western capitalism and Soviet communism, while the subsequent decades were strongly influenced by globalized neoliberal capitalism. In the first phase social-democratic state governments strengthened. In the second phase social democracies weakened and internationalized corporate oligarchies strengthened.

Political and economic trends in the second phase led to growing electoral or other resistances by the people. This was paralleled by growing media and academic discourse that disparaged resistances as populism. The debt-fueled international banking and financial crisis of 2008 was a critical event in the second phase, because of

⁷ <https://newleftreview.org/issues/1182/articles/marco-d-eramo-populism-and-the-new-oligarchy>

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/06/theresa-may-british-prime-minister-populism-rhetoric-is-as-rife-as-in-donald-trump-speeches>

⁹ <https://magazine.areweeurope.com/stories/elections-issue/julia-anne-costet-france-gilets-jaunes>

¹⁰ <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v41/n06/jeremy-harding/among-the-gilets-jaunes>

¹¹ <https://countercurrents.org/2019/05/venezuelas-crisis-a-view-from-the-communes>

¹² Alain Supiot, *Governance by Numbers: The Making of a Legal Model of Allegiance* (Oxford: Hart, 2017), 287

the way in which neoliberal governments in the US, UK and elsewhere exploited it by transferring massive debt responsibility from private corporations to the state, in effect to the people while simultaneously imposing austerity policies on them.

A decade ago Alain Supiot explained why this phase transformation represented a “betrayal”—by the upper classes¹³ in Western countries—of social justice commitments made to the people by their governments during the war.¹⁴ The basic dynamic was captured by Wolfgang Streeck in a 2014 essay:

Only in the Cold War did capitalism and democracy seem to become aligned with one another, as economic progress made it possible for working-class majorities to accept a free-market, private-property regime, in turn making it appear that democratic freedom was inseparable from, and indeed depended upon, the freedom of markets and profit-making.¹⁵

Populism in Antiquity

Streeck gave a detailed analysis of the background to the 2008 crisis in a 2014 monograph,¹⁶ but debt crises have recurred during the past several millennia, as studies by Michael Hudson and David Graeber showed.¹⁷ Responses by the people included populist activity leading to resolutions for the common good, some sustained for years or decades and inspiring future efforts.

The crisis of 2008 was special mainly in its great magnitude and the extent to which it was resolved by a method adverse to the common good, socializing corporate debt. On the basis of history, no one should have been surprised by the rise in diverse forms of populism in the neoliberal era, especially after 2008, or in the parallel rise in anti-populist discourse.

Significant instances of debt crises and populism can be found in ancient Rome and earlier in Athens. Both states had prominent political figures holding favourable views of lower-class people and who were successful populist leaders. Reviewing similarities and differences between Rome and Athens, M.I. Finley observed they and many other

¹³ In *Politics in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996 [1983]), 9, 10, M.I. Finley noted usage of concepts of class originated with Aristotle, not Marx. Aristotle wrote of rich, poor and middle classes.

¹⁴ Alain Supiot, *The Spirit of Philadelphia: Social Justice and the Total Market* (New York: Verso, 2012), Chapters 1-4

¹⁵ <https://newleftreview.org/issues/1187/articles/wolfgang-streeck-how-will-capitalism-end>

¹⁶ Wolfgang Streeck, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2014 [2013 German original])

¹⁷ Michael Hudson, ... *and forgive them their debts: Lending, Foreclosure and Redemption from Bronze Age Finance to the Jubilee Year* (Dresden: ISLET-Verlag, 2018); David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2014 [2011]). For example, regarding both Athens and Rome, Graeber commented “history begins with a series of debt crises.” (p. 228)

ancient states had formally similar government structures but differed substantially in functioning and evolution.

The Roman Republic was established as an oligarchic state when monarchical rule was overthrown c. 509 BC. Finley outlined why, despite recurring “debt crises” with strife resulting from wealth disparities and exploitations of the lower classes, “the Roman élite succeeded in constraining popular participation,” so that populism had limited effects. The Republic remained “essentially oligarchical” for almost five centuries, with a “super-élite body of life members,” the Senate constituting “the government.”¹⁸ Following a protracted series of civil wars and revolts in the first century BC, Rome reverted to monarchical rule as centre of the Empire.

In contrast, some influential members of the Athenian élite looked to democratization as a method for reducing or eliminating recurring crises and strife. They took the view that “government and statesmen” should use “eloquence and literary propaganda” (in addition to armed force when unavoidable), in efforts to gain wide acceptance of reforms, M.I. Rostovtzeff observed.¹⁹ These populist Athenian aristocrats eventually persuaded their community to put political stability ahead of class exploitation.

Rome

The *populares* (“favoring the people”)²⁰ were reformist political factions in the late Roman Republic whose goals included more equitable distribution of land or other forms of debt relief, with a leader of such a faction called a *popularis*.²¹ Vittorio Bufacci emphasized the “political agendas and methods” of Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus (c. 133 and 122 BC) “were distinctly populist.”²²

In a biography of Julius Caesar, Luciano Canforra called his subject “an influential representative of the *populares*” and “a true *popularis*.” From early on in his rise to high political and military offices, he aspired to reinstate or extend populist political reforms begun by the Gracchi and others that benefited the lower classes. His rise was aided also by the loyalty he inspired in soldiers under his command and veterans of earlier campaigns.²³

¹⁸ M.I. Finley, *Politics in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996 [1983]), 88-89, 111-112

¹⁹ M.I. Rostovtzeff, *Greece* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963 [1926]), 88

²⁰ Finley, 1-2, explained that both the Greek word *demos* and the Latin word *populus* had a “double connotation,” meaning either “the citizen body as a whole,” or “the common people, the many, poor,” depending on the context of their usage.

²¹ Lily Ross Taylor, *Party Politics in the Age of Caesar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964 [1949]), 11-16, 23, 71-75, wherein it is noted that Cicero and others used the term.

²² <https://www.21global.ucsb.edu/print/608>

²³ Luciano Canforra, *Julius Caesar: The Life and Times of the People’s Dictator* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 4, 14, 43, 47

As consul for the year 59 BC, Caesar instigated significant reforms and in the process “pursued an overtly ‘populist’ line.” Among these were debt relief, distribution of public land to the lower classes, and a law against bribery and extortion in courts. Also included was a law requiring publication of the record of Senate proceedings, thus improving government accountability. In this, “Caesar was clearly influenced by the Greek democratic tradition.”²⁴

Caesar’s reforms gave “his traditional power base tangible and positive signs that he was in control” and acting in their interests.²⁵ But such reforms alienated upper-class conservatives while still leaving many in the lower classes dissatisfied. Civil wars developed and to impose political stability quickly, democratic measures were “set aside,” with Caesar appointed dictator. He subsequently was assassinated.²⁶

Athens

Recorded populist action began c. 594 BC when Solon (an aristocrat) combined his authority as *archon* (chief magistrate) with personal eloquence to instigate major legal and economic reforms. These included “abolition of debt bondage” and extending citizenship to the lower classes.²⁷ However, his measures proved inadequate, periods of strife recurred, and Peisistratus assumed dictatorship.

Ultimately, in c. 508/7 BC, “a sharp struggle between aristocratic factions [was] won by Cleisthenes after he had ‘brought the *dēmos* [the common people] into his faction’,” Finley noted.²⁸ The influence Cleisthenes—a member of the Athenian élite—gained as a populist leader enabled him to instigate “profound changes into the political organization of the city, laying down the bases of the democracy that then developed in the course of the fifth century.”²⁹

The result was a hybrid structure with both direct democracy through the Assembly of all (male) citizens creating laws,³⁰ and representative democracy through an elected Council performing executive and administrative functions. Cleisthenes also reformed the electoral system of Athens (and surrounding Attica region) so that constituencies were distributed geographically (instead of by kinship), thereby helping to generate a

²⁴ Canforra, 78-80

²⁵ Canforra, 80

²⁶ Canforra, 87, 287-295, 368

²⁷ Sarah B. Pomeroy and others, *Ancient Greece: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*, Third Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 191-196. see also: Finley, 107, 109; Rostovtzeff, 89-81; and Hudson, 31

²⁸ Finley, 42. Here Finley quoted from Herodotus’ *The Histories* (c. 440 BC).

²⁹ Vincent Azoulay, *Pericles of Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014 [2010 French original]), 5

³⁰ In fifth century Athens, only free-born adult males had political rights. Women, slaves and immigrants were excluded from formal involvement in governance.

state-wide sense of community.³¹ However, a conservative aristocratic body, the *Areopagus* (named after the location of its meetings) retained significant oversight powers.

Further substantial democratization had to wait a few decades. Twice Greece was invaded by Persian forces and, although the Greeks won both wars, Athens suffered massive damage in the second war. But in 462 BC “the Athenians adopted sweeping political reforms at the instigation of the democratic leader, Ephialtes,³² who had risen to political prominence from the lower classes.³³ Notably, “most of the powers of the *Areopagus* ... were distributed among popular institutions—the Assembly, the Council, and the law courts—thereby sparking off the effective democratization of the city.”³⁴

Ephialtes was assassinated not long afterward, but his upper-class ally Pericles then began rising in political and military stature. During the next three decades Pericles became the most prominent leader in Athens, carrying forward and expanding the programs initiated by his great-uncle Cleisthenes and Ephialtes. In an account of Pericles’ life and times, Vincent Azoulay noted that significant political resistance by conservatives “opposed to the rise to power of the people (the *dēmos*)” continued so that “his authority at no point went unchallenged.” However, Pericles and his supporters usually prevailed both in peacetime and wartime so that Athenian “democracy gradually became stronger.”³⁵

Pericles’ legislative measures included opening city magistracies to lower class citizens, and remuneration for service in civic offices so that poverty was no bar to membership on juries or holding administrative posts. He “initiated a policy of major public works” that included construction of the Parthenon and the Odeon. Such projects provided employment for artists, artisans, stonemasons, carpenters, general labourers and others, many of whom were war veterans.³⁶ Such programs constituted substantial redistribution of state financial resources directly to citizens and their families, and indirectly to those they employed. Thus, Athens was a precursor to modern social democracy.³⁷

³¹ Rostovtzeff, 94-95

³² Azoulay, 26

³³ A.R. Burn, *The Pelican History of Greece* (Markham: Penguin, 1987 [1966]), 211

³⁴ Azoulay, 26

³⁵ Azoulay, 6

³⁶ Azoulay, 7, 62-66, 68-69

³⁷ Azoulay (p. 79-80) suggested that comparison of Periclean Athens with modern social democracy would be anachronistic because it “had no economic policies, as such,” despite having substantial redistributive policies. He argued that economic growth and increasing employment were not its objectives because Athenians had no theory of political economy. However, it was not necessary to have an abstract theory in order to understand that stagnation and poverty could generate dangerous instability and strife. This empirical fact was understood by Solon and later democrats he inspired. Although civic leaders had additional motives, such as civic aggrandizement through impressive architectural and engineering projects, it is clear they were mindful of stability issues.

As a result of democratization, "every citizen learned to regard the government not as an external and alien thing, but as something identical to the body of citizens, and each justly looked upon himself as a working part of the governmental machine," Rostovtzeff commented.³⁸

Athens went into decline after Pericles and many others died in 429 BC as victims of an infectious disease epidemic, and military defeat in 404 BC by Sparta when democracy was then suppressed. The Athenians restored their democracy in 403 BC, and it continued until 322 BC³⁹ when "democracy was dismantled" by Macedonia and replaced with an oligarchy.⁴⁰

Free Speech in Athens

More than two millennia passed before freedoms and rights comparable to, or surpassing, those of democratic Athens were established in the modern world. Aspects may still be directly relevant to present controversies, Teresa M. Bejan suggested in a 2017 article explaining the Greeks had two concepts for what we call free speech: *isēgoria* and *parrhēsia*. The former denoted "the equal right of citizens to participate in the Assembly," and the latter "the license to say what one pleased, how and when one pleased, and to whom."⁴¹

Among other contexts, *parrhēsia* was expansively exercised in the theatre, and plays by comic poets, such as Aristophanes, were sharply critical or derisive of prominent citizens such as Pericles, Cleon and Socrates. Moral, ethical and justice issues, including truth-telling, were central in plays by tragedians such as Euripides, a staunch supporter of democracy with its freedoms and rights. The modern significance of *parrhēsia* in Euripides' work was discussed by Michel Foucault in 1983.⁴² I.F. Stone later commented: "The emancipation of women begins in Euripides."⁴³

Stone contrasted political life in Athens with that in Sparta or Rome. Every Athenian citizen had the right to speak, make proposals and vote in the Assembly. In Sparta, only the members of the governing oligarchy had the right to address its assembly; ordinary citizens had only the right to vote. Rome was similar, to the extent that "Latin had no word for *isēgoria*. Roman law had no use for it."⁴⁴

³⁸ Rostovtzeff, 97

³⁹ <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7f/Constitution-of-the-Athenians-in-the-4th-century-BC.png>

⁴⁰ Sarah B. Pomeroy and others, 474

⁴¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/12/two-concepts-of-freedom-of-speech/546791/>

⁴² Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001)

⁴³ I.F. Stone, *The Trial of Socrates* (Toronto: Little, Brown and Co., 1988), 221

⁴⁴ Stone, 217-218

Azoulay outlined why neither *isēgoria* or *parrhēsia* was unlimited. For example, censorship could be imposed in times of crisis, and playwrights such as Aristophanes could be prosecuted for critical remarks about public figures in their plays. However, "in the fifth century, no law restrained the freedom of speech of the comic poets for very long."⁴⁵ Individuals could be prosecuted for impiety against the state religion, but such charges sometimes had political motives, as in the cases of philosophers Anaxagoras (c. 434 BC) who was a friend of Pericles,⁴⁶ and Socrates (399 BC) "who despised democracy and idealized oligarchic Sparta."⁴⁷

Finley observed that the diversity of governmental structures in the Greek world helped to stimulate "the first attempts in history at conscious political analysis and reflection," especially in Athens where political discussion was "continuous, intense and *public*." Such analysis and reflection continued from fifth century Athens into the fourth century when Plato and Aristotle became "the first genuine political theorists,"⁴⁸ work that continues to inspire.⁴⁹

Modern Populism and Free Speech

Surveying demands for democracy, rights and freedoms made during the Enlightenment, Jonathan Israel noted "the Renaissance's rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy" was a significant stimulus.⁵⁰ Bertrand Russell emphasized the relative importance: "Rome was culturally parasitic on Greece. The Romans ... constructed no original system of philosophy ..."⁵¹ By the late sixteenth century a number of surviving Greek texts had been translated into modern European languages (often from Latin or Arabic versions) and widely read.

Among late-Renaissance demands were two made during the English Civil War. John Milton published an appeal to Parliament in 1644 against censorship and for freedom of speech, *Areopagitica*, titled after an address by the Athenian orator Isocrates. Initially, it "attracted very little attention."⁵²

⁴⁵ Azoulay, 151

⁴⁶ Azoulay, 21, 92

⁴⁷ I.F. Stone, 121,

⁴⁸ Finley, 123-124

⁴⁹ For instance, Alain Badiou, *Plato's Republic: A dialogue in 16 Chapters* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). In the Introduction to this re-imagining of Plato's work, Kenneth Reinhart wrote: "For Badiou, Plato is the first warrior in the eternal battle of ... truth against opinion, and the progenitor of the living idea of communism."

⁵⁰ Jonathan Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 8

⁵¹ Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965 [1946]), 283-284

⁵² C.V. Wedgwood, *The King's War 1641-1647* (Toronto: Penguin, 2001 [1958]), 396

In 1647 Oliver Cromwell, a leader of the victorious New Model army agreed to chair a series of debates on state governance. Included was a proposal for major democratic reforms drafted by a populist group called the Levellers. Led by John Lilburne, a prominent political dissenter and his ally William Walwyn, they understood that turning ideas into action required organization and leadership.⁵³ The debates resulted in a proposal on rights⁵⁴ to participate in governance that in effect foresaw Articles 21(1) and 21(3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—but only for adult males.⁵⁵

However, such aspirations were not even partially realized in England or elsewhere until after more revolts and wars: the English, American and French revolutions, the pan-European revolt of 1848, and the American Civil War. The revolutionary reforms initially benefited the upper classes, except in France where liberty was joined to equality for all adult males, independent of class, religion or ethnicity.⁵⁶

Both the American and French revolutions were inspired in part by the actions and writings of Enlightenment intellectuals centred in Paris during the mid-eighteenth century. Their promotion of freedoms and rights had a populist character and their ideas were disseminated internationally. A key demand was for freedom of expression, promoted by Denis Diderot and others, and enacted in both France and America c. 1790.

However, effectiveness of legislated freedoms or rights depended on the context and individual or group resources to enforce them. For example, in the US the courts “repeatedly refused to protect any form of speech,” David Kairys explained. But “change came in the 1930s” as a result of populist activity by labour unions and other groups. “The expansion of speech rights ... resumed in the 1960s and early 1970s” as a result of demands by large populist movements focused on civil rights or war opposition, or both.⁵⁷

Also, in the US, slaves were emancipated in 1865 when the Civil War ended, but their new freedoms and rights were deliberately and comprehensively eroded by state laws, court decisions and violence, C. Vann Woodward explained,⁵⁸ violence that included widespread lynchings⁵⁹ and several massacres.⁶⁰ It was not until the mid-1960s that demands and actions by populist organizations succeeded, with the passage of new laws by Congress. The success was due to the massive growth and increasing

⁵³ Wedgwood, 518

⁵⁴ <https://www.economist.com/open-future/2019/06/28/globalisation-is-dead-and-we-need-to-invent-a-new-world-order>

⁵⁵ Geoffrey Robertson, *The Levellers: The Putney Debates* (New York: Verso, 2018 [2007]), xxv, xxxi

⁵⁶ Georges Lefebvre, *The French Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2004 [1957]), 88-89, 141

⁵⁷ David Kairys (ed.), *The Politics of Law: A Progressive Critique* (New York: Basic Books, 1998 [1992]), 193, 197

⁵⁸ C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002 [1955])

⁵⁹ <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/emmett-lynching-america/>

⁶⁰ <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/america-s-other-civil-war-1.5151203>

effectiveness of the organizations comprising the civil rights movement, including the Southern Christian Leadership Conference led by Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee with leaders such as Stokely Carmichael and Dianne Nash.⁶¹

Internationally, women were not granted equal legal rights until about a century ago. This followed a century and a half of populist activity by diverse movements and groups in several countries, inspired by such pioneers as Olympe de Gouges and Mary Wollstonecraft. Achievement of at least approximate social and economic equality for women is even more recent and required additional populist activity.

In the name of populism, freedoms and rights can also be undermined by actions against the rights of women and religious or ethnic minorities, or against freedom of expression and political dissent. Developments in recent years include, for example: political mob violence in India,⁶² violent appropriation of indigenous peoples' lands in Brazil,⁶³ and attempted genocide of the Rohingya in Myanmar.⁶⁴

As Pankaj Mishra,⁶⁵ Chris Hedges⁶⁶ and others commented, some of these developments have been either provoked or induced by reactionary populist government leaders, assisted by mainstream and social media. The objective is to maintain or strengthen neoliberal programs through identity-politics, including generation of resentments and intolerance. This serves oligarchic interests instead of the common good.

David Bromwich discussed additional threats to free speech in a 2016 essay, "What are we allowed to say?" He opened with an observation related to Streeck's 2014 conclusion (cited above):

Since the fall of Soviet communism, liberal bureaucrats in the North Atlantic Democracies have kept busy constructing speech codes and guidelines on civility to soften the impact of unpleasant ideas.⁶⁷

With ever-increasing influence by social media, the groundwork "to recruit a voluntary corps of citizen police" has been laid, Bromwich noted, adding that "the older protections of individual speech" are being undermined by identity-focused populist demands for new speech restrictions. Citing a passage from Milton's *Areopagitica*, he explained that "Any law devised to winnow out the noxious materials can only weaken

⁶¹ <https://taylorbranch.com/king-era-trilogy/>

⁶² <https://scroll.in/article/912533/the-modi-years-what-has-fuelled-rising-mob-violence-in-india>

⁶³ <https://theintercept.com/2019/02/16/brazil-bolsonaro-indigenous-land/>

⁶⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/27/world/asia/myanmar-rohingya-genocide.html>

⁶⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/23/opinion/modi-india-election.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>

⁶⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YN2S5zlUpxl>

⁶⁷ <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n18/david-bromwich/what-are-we-allowed-to-say>

the very people it protects.” Bromwich concluded by citing Beatrix Campbell: “There is a human right to life, but there is no right to be not offended.”⁶⁸

Thus, populist mobilization has been a force for progressive social change by extending rights and freedoms and generating means to make them effective. But populism also has been mobilized by, and on behalf of, powerful interests for such reactionary purposes as undermining democratic and human rights of marginalized groups.

Future Prospects

Progressive populist activity on an international scale will be required in order that the existential threats of nuclear war, climate change and chemical pollution can be addressed effectively. Post-war history provides several examples in which progressive populist action within key states helped to generate practical solutions to significant global problems that were effective across international boundaries. As outlined in previous CFE posts mentioning relevant populist activities, the examples include: the ban on atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons and several subsequent nuclear arms limitation treaties;⁶⁹ stricter controls on DDT and some other toxic chemicals (such as leaded gasoline);⁷⁰ and the Montreal treaty to protect the Earth’s ozone layer. Although not universally adopted, each had significant beneficial effects.

The 2015 Paris agreement on addressing climate change, although inadequate, represented a significant initial response by the many ratifying states to populist concerns and actions of their own citizens, including great efforts by leading climatologists to explain in lay terms the scientific bases and implications of the problem.⁷¹

Prospects for successful progressive populist actions on these threats are more limited now than a half-century ago, because of the enormous concentrations of wealth and power generated by globalized neoliberal capitalism that helps underwrite a reactionary counter-populism. However, this may be partially offset by the global scope of the escalating risks. No region or country is immune.

Humanity must adopt new social and political systems to replace neoliberal ideology. Although new forms may vary from state to state, they must actively recognize: (i) we evolved as a social species in which individual good is balanced against the common good; (ii) our existence depends on complex interdependencies with many and diverse other species, ranging from microscopic to macroscopic.

⁶⁸ <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n14/letters#letter6>

⁶⁹ <https://cfe.ryerson.ca/blog/2016/12/word-worth-thousand-pictures>

⁷⁰ <https://cfe.ryerson.ca/blog/2018/01/facilitated-disinformation>

⁷¹ <https://cfe.ryerson.ca/blog/2017/03/climate-change-information-and-disinformation>

Proposals for more sustainable, and more effectively democratic systems have been discussed by Alain Badiou and Marcel Gauchet, involving new forms of communism, or of social democracy, or combinations thereof. These must avoid, or at least limit the defects of forms already tried.⁷² A related proposal was advanced by Martin Hägglund.⁷³ Both Badiou and Hägglund acknowledged that existential time is running short for global implementation by peaceful means of any new, potentially more viable governance systems. On the basis of history, internationally coherent and progressive populist activity demanding such change is the only effective way to overcome entrenched power of international oligarchies.

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⁷² Alain Badiou and Marcel Gauchet, *What Is To Be Done? A Dialogue on Communism, Capitalism, and the Future of Democracy* (Malden MA: Polity Press, 2016 [2014]). See also Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Politics* (Malden MA: Polity Press, 2019 [2017]), Chapter 2 and p. 53-54.

⁷³ Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (New York: Pantheon, 2019), Chapter 6 and p. 385, 389