To fend off populism, we must stop believing in the will of the People

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*Populists rely on an idea of the people as a single, united force. Unfortunately, argues **Luke Temple**, traditional conceptions of democracy itself depend on a very similar notion. Unity and concordance is prized. This makes it difficult to challenge the underlying basis of populists' arguments. But there is another way of understanding democracy – as a series of challenges and discords – and it is one that gives us an intellectual bedrock on which to build an opposition to populism.*

Detail from La Liberté guidant le peuple (le 28 juillet 1830) by Eugène Delacroix, Musée du Louvre. Source: Europeana via a CC-BY-NC-SA licence

"The populists can be beaten" runs the headline of a recent *New Statesman* article. But can they? While it's true that, electorally, citizens might push back against the likes of Geert Wilders and (potentially) Marine Le Pen, the *idea* of populism cannot be defeated – at least, not with our standard understanding of liberal representative democracy.

Populism needs democracy

The problem can be highlighted through the many different analogies used to describe the relationship between populism and liberal democracy; populism is variously a shadow, a mirror, a counterfeit, a pathogen, a cancer. Populism is the Mr Hyde to democracy's Dr Jekyll . What all these metaphors share is an understanding that, in one way or another, the issues of populism come from within a democratic system: they require a democratic system to exist. As Jan-Werner Müller puts it in his recent book, *What is Populism?*: "Populism is only thinkable in the context of representative democracy." This means that Müller's chosen metaphor, the shadow, is a 'permanent' one and a 'constant peril'.

Perhaps the most important reason for this is that both populism and democracy utilise the concept of 'the People' and the notion of a consensus. Democracy can of course be described as 'government of the people, by the people, for the people.' But Abraham Lincoln's snappy summary doesn't help us much with 'the boundary problem': that is, which people? Populists have an easy answer – the *real* people (whom they, the populist politician, just happen to represent). Such language appears in the Brexit victory speech of Nigel Farage and Jeremy's Corbyn's new year message. More radically, it frequently crops up in the pronouncements of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and previously in the sloganeering of Hugo Chavez ('the people

will re-elect the people'). As Müller highlights, in his way, Donald Trump perhaps put it best whilst on the campaign trail: "the only important thing is the unification of the people – because the other people don't mean anything."

For populists, then, 'the People' are what Michael Freeden calls an indivisible 'undifferentiated singularity'. They have a general will, which the populist politician instinctively understands. Those who fall outside this people are not real. Most likely they are elites, out to feather their own beds at the expense of the real, ordinary people. This perspective – or ontological view of the social world, as Freeden calls it – is a key element of populist politics. The problem is that it's also a wellspring from which many democrats drink, albeit in a diluted form.

The concordant view of democracy

Political theorist William E. Connelly argues that when thinking about politics, thinkers as wide-ranging and influential as Locke, Kant, Marx, Habermas, Rawls and Dworkin all provide theories that 'gravitate towards an ontology of concord'. In other words, when things are going correctly the 'individual or collective subject achieves harmony with itself and the other elements of social life'. Most democratic theories are built on such notions of harmony and consensus.

After an electoral battering (or in the wake of a referendum), how often do surviving governments ' urge unity'? In the Brexit aftermath, an editorial from *The Sun* urged 'United we ALL must now stand' against racist attacks. But ALL of us includes the racist attackers. This isn't a semantic point – concordant understandings of democracy struggle with division and have a tricky relationship with ideas of 'otherness'. If a theory doesn't sweep 'otherness' under the carpet, it often tries to eradicate it. As Connolly puts it

> *'any otherness discerned in the actual world becomes a sign that the selves in which it is located are incapacitated or that there is unintegrated material in need of assimilation or that the community needs to be broadened to internalise what is now external to it.'*

And so the logic of a concordant ontology is that otherness must be 'corrected, eliminated, punished, or integrated.' The focus of democratic politics then becomes how to achieve this 'normalisation', to use Connolly's term.

This a less rhetorically extreme version of the single, unified 'the People' evoked by the populists, but what matters is that the impetus is the same. A concordant understanding of democracy will always provide the material for populism to feed on because in its very DNA the idea of harmony – of a consensus – is tied inseparably to the idea of a singular will of the People. You need one for the other. This, I would argue, is the main way in which democracy allows populism to come from within.

But there is an alternative way of understanding democracy. We can take a *discordant* approach.

A discordant approach: agonistic democracy

Chantal Mouffe and Connolly offer a different conception of democracy. Their arguments point towards the idea of *agonistic* democracy, which is built on ideas of *discord* and the politics of disturbance. At the heart of such a system is constant ambiguity. Consensus is an illusion, Mouffe writes, and far from being the aim of democracy, should be recognised as being fatal to it. Both theorists point to the fundamental important of otherness and difference to a democracy: "the condition of existence of every identity is the affirmation of a difference" (Mouffe); "An ontology of discordance identifies some forms of otherness as the unavoidable effect of socially engendered harmonies." (Connolly).

From a discordant perspective this difference, far from being a problem in a democracy, is what drives it. In this understanding a democratic system should not be about consensus but instead concerns 'constant challenges to

old relations of identity and difference' with politics disrupting 'settled understandings' and 'fixed arrangements of democratic rule' (Connolly again). This means that we can never take democracy for granted, as 'there is no threshold of democracy that once reached will guarantee its continued existence' (Mouffe again).

Under this understanding of democracy, any campaign or idea of a singular will of the People is inherently suspect and contestable – in a way that is much more problematic from a concordant perspective. A discordant understanding is capable of eroding the bedrock of populism. The populist's primary source of legitimacy is removed when democracy is understood and built not around 'the People' but around an ever-shifting battleground of political ideas. And of course this is something most democrats instinctively know anyway; in day-to-day politics we deal not with 'the People' but with multiple People*s*. It's all about the plurals, and if a consensus approach is rejected and it is recognised that plurals are forever, then we can build an argument against what Müller calls the 'moralised form of antipluralism' that drives populism as a political strategy.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.

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