Chapter 3

Anti-populism, Meritocracy, and (Technocratic) Elitism

Savvas Voutyras

Abstract:

Populism is typically accused of fuelling political polarisation. Yet, while the populist side of this polarisation has been at the centre of populism scholarship, the other side – the anti-populist camp – has been largely ignored. This chapter argues that studying anti-populism is essential for making fuller sense of populism, since the two are entangled in a type of dialectical relation. Anti-populism is understood as a distinct political discourse aimed at delegitimising challenges to the status quo, and has become a prominent feature of the rhetoric of western political and media elites, i.e., the traditional liberal centre. The chapter focuses on and critically discusses two core normative and ideological features of anti-populism, namely meritocracy and technocracy. Both principles underpin the distinction and growing disparities between elites and 'the rest'; meritocracy by producing a hierarchy of worth, and technocracy by justifying the narrowing down of political participation by ordinary citizens.

Introduction

During the last decade or so, public life in western liberal democratic societies has been marked by turbulence and polarisation. It is not only that conflicts over various issues have become intense and bitter (economic agendas, immigration, etc.); we also see a decline in citizens' trust towards national and international institutions, including their countries' party systems (many of which have undergone historic transformations after recent election results). Alongside this, the character and tone of public debate has become aggressive and blunt. Few would deny that we are indeed facing such developments. That the root cause of them all, however, is 'populism', has become one of the most widespread clichés of our time, circulated by liberal politicians, media, and various organisations. 'Populism' was the 2017 'word of the year' for Cambridge dictionary (2017), after the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump were attributed to it, while widely read centrist newspapers (e.g., *The Guardian* and *The Financial Times*) held extensive series dedicated to it, often linking it to the socio-political malaises of our time. Later, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, 'populism' again proved to be a flexible enough category to be readily applied to those who questioned the measures proposed by experts – or the existence of the pandemic altogether (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2020; Galanopoulos and Venizelos 2021). As Yannis Stavrakakis (2017: 1) noted, we do not just talk about populism; rather, we 'cannot stop talking' about it. In fact, we cannot stop talking *pejoratively* about it.

The aim of this chapter is twofold. On one hand, it aims to present 'anti-populism' as a distinct political discourse primarily aimed at delegitimising challenges to the status quo. On the other hand, it seeks to flesh out some of the defining normative and ideological features of today's anti-populism. The first section describes the contemporary political and scholarly context in which anti-populism emerges. The main claim here is that a proper understanding

of populism (either seen as a political phenomenon or as a concept) requires making sense of the ways in which it has been confronted by its opponents. The second section links anti-populism to broader historical tendencies against mass politics, which have found their contemporary form in what historian Christopher Lasch called 'the revolt of the elites'. Proceeding from there, the rest of the chapter zooms in on two of anti-populism's main features. Thus, the third section presents a critical discussion of meritocracy, as a principle of distribution and recognition of worth. The final section discusses technocracy and the narrow, even distorted conceptions of democracy and politics found in pro-technocratic anti-populism.

Anti-populism: The Other of Populism

'Populism's' frequent weaponization in political, media, and institutional discourse often takes the form of a catch-all: an easy way of discrediting, but also obscuring diverse challenges to the status quo (economic egalitarian, nativist, or other). For similar reasons, some scholars note that populism constitutes '[o]ne of the most used and abused terms […]. At times it seems that almost every politician, at least those we do not like, is a populist' (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012: 1). Populism constitutes an *exonym*: today there are very few politicians, parties or movements who present themselves as 'populist'. Rather, 'populist' is a negative characterisation attached to certain actors and groups by their opponents from the outside.

Historically, this was not always the case. Famously, it was the US People's Party that introduced the term into the political vocabulary, and whose members proudly adopted the name 'populists'. The American populists developed an egalitarian agenda committed to

defending the interests of 'the people', the underprivileged majority, from the power of elites, whose interests were being prioritised by the main parties (Frank 2020). The pejorative use of the term as we know it today, not adopted as a name by anyone, appeared for the first time after WWII – a long time after the decline of the populist movement – and kept spreading since then. Even more paradoxically, populism-as-a-taint is something that grew in times during which the referent of 'the people' – the category on which populism depended – became more and more marginal in political discourse (D'Eramo 2013: 8). While it could be argued that this is simply a conceptually and historically inaccurate use of 'populism', the issue with such uses of is not simply about questions of accuracy. Such uses have their own performative effects on political communication – and political conduct more generally; most importantly, the emergence of *anti-populism* as a distinct political discourse. While we are used to hearing about populism all the time, anti-populism has a much less familiar ring to it. As Benjamin Moffitt (2018: 2) has argued, this may be because 'anti-populism is not a clear ideological disposition or mode of governance, but rather an odd mix of ideological and strategic bedfellows pulled together in a temporary alliance of opposition to populism'. Even in academic discourse, anti-populism has received little attention, let alone scrutiny. Given that anti-populism tends to be the natural or default position in academia, it has become 'somewhat invisible and seemingly unworthy of explicit study' (2018: 5).

However, as Stavrakakis et al. (2017) note, there is a need to study populism in conjunction with anti-populism, if we are to make full sense of the recent developments routinely linked to populism. Following the post-structuralist insight that identity is premised on difference, they argue that populism and anti-populism are engaged in a dialectical relation of *mutual constitution*, and the study of anti-populism should be seen as a *sine qua non* for achieving a broader and more comprehensive understanding of populism and its role in contemporary

politics. Empirical observations and analysis provide support to this point. In many countries – especially in the European context – the traditional left/right divide gave way to a populism/anti-populism one. We have seen former political opponents (typically the two main centre-left and centre-right parties – i.e., the political mainstream) coming together to a common front against 'populism' (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2019).

The deployment of 'populism' as a pejorative label is a feature of the rhetoric of the liberal centre, including politicians and media associated with both the centre-right and the centre-left. The use of such label to characterise their opponents – the non-centre – effects the blurring of the very significant differences between those opponents (think of the exclusive xenophobic nationalism at the core of right-wing populism vs the inclusive economic egalitarianism that constitutes the central feature of left-wing populism). In anti-populism, therefore, we see the revival of the so-called 'horseshoe theory'; the two 'extremes' are similar, and they are similar precisely by virtue of being 'extremes' in a specific symmetrical depiction of the political spectrum. The operation of this as a delegitimising tactic is clear: since everyone *else* is labelled as 'populist', liberal anti-populists can effectively claim that there is no alternative to the centrist line – at least not a *legitimate* one (Rancière 2017).

While the call for a less polarising – and maybe even consensus-seeking – political debate initially seems obvious, we should resist falling for it too easily. As Michael Sandel (2018) notes, even when entangled with xenophobic or nationalist sentiments, populism often involves a kernel of legitimate grievances of various types – economic, moral, and cultural. A rushed and unconditional condemnation of populism's adversariality, then, endangers hiding under the carpet a series of justified challenges to the status quo. Staying at the level of

condemning populists for division and polarisation, while systematically failing to understand and engage with these grievances, is akin to tone policing: it shifts the focus away from one's claims and towards the *way* in which these are expressed (the stereotype of the 'angry', 'uncivil', 'vulgar' populist). Furthermore, we have to scrutinise the ways in which the anti-populist forces, the political mainstream, has been responding to these challenges while seeking de-contestation of the status quo. This requires, on the one hand, an understanding of the context in which the populism/anti-populism cleavage emerges and, on the other, an engagement with the main ideological-normative aspects of anti-populism.

The Revolt of the Elites

[D]enunciations of populism like the ones we hear so frequently nowadays arise from a long tradition of pessimism about popular sovereignty and democratic participation. […] The name I give to that pessimistic tradition is "anti-populism," and […] we will find it using the same rhetoric over and over again […]. Its most toxic ingredient a highbrow contempt for ordinary Americans—is as poisonous today as it was in the Victorian era or in the Great Depression (Frank 2020: 16).

Anti-populism is not entirely new. At its core, it comprises convictions and dispositions regarding the place and role of ordinary citizens (the many, the multitude, *the people*) in the political process which go a long way back. More specifically, it captures a suspicion towards the masses, and a desire to limit their political involvement, described by some as 'demophobia' (Marlière 2013). A genealogy of anti-populism would take us all the way back to the formation of mass societies following the Industrial Revolution, the subsequent emergence of mass politics, and the fear the latter caused to the upper classes of the time. It is

against this backdrop that Gustave Le Bon developed his crowd psychology, in which he described crowds as mobs who act in irrational and impulsive ways, overtaken by their most violent instincts, and 'hypnotised' by master figures who turn them into their instruments. The medical metaphor of the disease runs through Le Bon's description of the crowd (D'Eramo 2013: 11-12; Laclau 2015: 21-30), effectively seeing collective action as such as a pathology. The main thrust of Le Bon's theory became a commonplace in the western political tradition and has had a lasting influence, informing elite attitudes toward egalitarian struggles even since. In his history of American anti-populism, Thomas Frank (2020) provides some powerful illustrations of such reactions against the rise of the People's Party in the late 19th century and Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s. In both cases, the masses were depicted as mobs motivated by envy and revenge, their leading figures as demagogues, the reforms they sought as based on ignorance and hubris towards the 'natural order of things'.

More than any other time, the denouncement of populism, as expressed today by the liberal centre, takes place in the name of a commitment to democracy. But, while political and media elites claim to defend democracy from the populist threat, others have argued that it is the core norms and implications of anti-populism that run counter to – and even reverse – egalitarian democratic achievement. One of those suspicious of the commitment of elites to democracy was American historian Christopher Lasch, an author vocal about his own populist sympathies, who left us one of the starkest warnings about the transformation of elites and elite culture. The title of his most relevant work, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (Lasch 1995), is a reference to the 1930 classic *The Revolt of the Masses* by José Ortega y Gasset, which Lasch seeks to revisit in light of the big shifts that took place in the few decades before the 1990s. In the interwar period, echoing American

anti-populism, Ortega warned about the emerging threat for Western civilisation that he saw in the rise of the masses to power – at the time exemplified by socialism and fascism. The 'mass man', differs very starkly from the subject at the heart of previous socio-historical transformations who had a sense of historic duty, held themselves to high standards, and assumed responsibility for the values and ideals they expressed. In contrast, the mass man is characterized by resentment, ignorance, and a sense of entitlement without responsibility, while despising duties and obligations. He is the 'spoiled child of human history' (Ortega y Gasset in Lasch 1995: 24).

60-odd years later, Lasch notes how things changed. The dangerous characteristics Ortega saw in the masses, Lasch believes are now most visible in the elites that Ortega saw as the natural vanguards and guardians of western social and cultural achievement. Ordinary people are more likely to be suspicious towards fast and constant social transformations associated with radical-progressive ideas (including the very notion of 'progress'), when compared to the elite classes. And it is precisely because of this that they are met with contempt by today's 'progressive' elites. It is the elites who have abandoned the virtues Ortega saw in them, such as the traditional values of restraint, prudence, and responsibility. Economic transformation, in particular regarding distribution, is a testament to this. The post-war 'golden age' of capitalism came with redistributive policies pushing towards a 'democratisation of abundance' (Lasch 1995: 29-30). However, a trend in the opposite direction emerged in the late 1970s that has since expanded and intensified. By 1991, Lasch (1995: 45) notes, the top 20% in the US controlled 50% of the country's wealth. The redesigning of the economy to focus on finance, information, and services, the loss of jobs caused by the migration of manufacturing, the increase of part-time work, are also telling of the gap between the traditional working class and the new classes of professionals and white-collar workers of the

globalised economy. After more than four decades of neoliberalism, these shifts have intensified further. By 2019, the US top 20% became in control of 77% of the country's wealth (Sawhill and Pulliam 2019). The gig economy (Crouch 2019) characterises the working conditions of a large number of working individuals in the West, while economic precariousness has given rise to an entirely new social underclass, the precariat (Standing 2011). For Lasch, it is not only that the elites – and not the masses, as Ortega feared – are in control, but that they also seem to be increasingly losing interest in the welfare of the societies they control.

Economic developments are only a part of the picture. What Lasch points to is that the upper middle classes are not distinguished from the rest only by their higher income, but also by their outright different lifestyle and culture. These new elites are not the traditional bourgeois class:

> Their investment in education and information, as opposed to property, distinguishes them from the rich bourgeoisie, the ascendancy of which characterized an earlier stage of capitalism, and from the old proprietary class – the middle class, in the strict sense of the term – that once made up the bulk of the population (Lasch 1996: 34).

They are obsessed with education and credentials, and it is on the basis of such achievements that they see themselves as 'the best and the brightest' (Lasch: 1996: 39). The elite who constitute the target of Lasch's polemic, have more in common with the elite of other advanced societies than with their fellow Americans. Their independence from public services, their involvement in the global market, leisure, and cultural activities across borders,

has transformed their sense of place and civic obligation – including their declining sense of obligation to contribute to the public services they themselves do not need anymore (Lasch 1996: 45-47). Their secession from the 'common fate' and their insulation in their own enclaves resemble aristocratic rather than democratic arrangements and historical precedents. In 'populist' terms, the elite do not only secure an increasingly larger share of wealth and social goods for themselves; they also essentially remove themselves from 'the rest' (i.e., the people) and rid themselves of any duty towards them.

Meritocracy and Elitist Arrogance

The transformation Lasch described is intertwined with a major political shift in western democracies that also begins in the 1990s. This comprises the transformation of political parties of the left – labour, social democratic, and socialist parties – into 'centre-left' parties, after adopting 'third way' politics, effectively aligning themselves with the neoliberal approach to economic policy and the primacy of the market introduced by the right. The claim was that the neoliberalism of the right was unfair, as it allowed inequalities of birth to determine outcomes. A just society would allow everyone the opportunity to develop their talents and reach their full potential, and to be rewarded accordingly. Alongside this, and as a result, the centre-left replaced its loyalty to the working and lower middle classes with a loyalty to the new elite of the 'credentialed' professional class. These parties also replaced their commitment to equality with 'equality of opportunity'. The social ideal that we should strive to achieve came to be known as *meritocracy*, and it constitutes the moral pillar of the arrangement described so far. Meritocracy is tightly linked to the idea of social mobility, which has been for decades, in western societies, an undisputed social goal.

This is how the terms 'merit', 'opportunity', and 'mobility' became so central in political discourse. Tony Blair's brand of *New Labour* is probably the most characteristic example of this:

> That is the true Party of aspiration, of opportunity, dedicated to creating a genuine meritocratic Britain where people can get to the highest level their talents take them; where we break down every barrier, every impediment to our big idea - the development of human potential (Blair 2001).

Blair justified his government's policies by pointing that the new rising class, unlike the elites of the past, is a meritorious one: 'Slowly but surely the old establishment is being replaced by a new, larger, more meritocratic middle class' (Blair 1999). The meritocratic ideal has had a strong ideological influence, since it was also embraced by the centre-right and became a new 'common sense'. David Cameron (2012), conservative UK PM, promised to turn the UK into an 'aspiration nation', which was precisely his own version of meritocracy; a vision that was not only an economic, but also a moral one. And Theresa May, Cameron's successor, was also explicit about her vision of turning Britain into

> the world's great meritocracy – a country where everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talent and their hard work will allow […] And I want Britain to be a place where advantage is based on merit not privilege; where it's your talent and hard work that matter, not where you were born, who your parents are or what your accent sounds like (May 2016).

Something similar could be seen in other western democracies. In the US, meritocracy was captured in one of Barack Obama's most circulated slogans: 'Here in America, you can make it if you try'. Mitt Romney, his Republican opponent in the 2012 presidential election, also framed himself as a committed meritocrat. Nevertheless, the centre-left has been more faithful to the idea: in the UK and the US, references to meritocracy disappeared from the discourse of the right during the administrations of Boris Johnson and Donald Trump.

Why is meritocracy relevant to a discussion about anti-populism? Meritocracy forms the moral narrative through which the privileged status enjoyed by the elites is legitimated. Unlike a hereditary aristocracy of birth, which we rightly take to be morally arbitrary, in a meritocratic setting the allocation of position and rewards is justified, we are told. Meritocracy allows today's elites to see and present themselves as self-made, their success as the result of their own talent and hard work and – it follows from this – to believe they do not owe much to the rest.

Several authors (Bloodworth 2016; Littler 2017) have already pointed out that, in practice, meritocracy is a façade; it distorts the actual way in which the world works. The liberal societies that talk about meritocracy are themselves far from fulfilling the principle. The lottery of birth – i.e., family wealth – is still the strongest determinant of how well one does in life. In *The Meritocracy Trap*, Daniel Markovits demonstrates this quite clearly by looking at the socioeconomic makeup of Ivy League college students in the US – those who will later be eligible for the most prestigious and well-paying jobs. At Harvard and Yale, in particular, 'more students come from households in the top 1 percent of the income distribution than

from the entire bottom half' (Markovits 2019). One's future cannot transcend the limits set by pedigree, even in institutions like the universities, who see themselves as temples of meritocracy. Faith in meritocracy is very deeply ingrained in western culture. What is more, surveys have revealed that a large part of the populations of post-industrial economies do not just believe that they *should* live in a meritocratic society, but also that they *do* live in one already (Kunovich and Slomczynski). A recent survey (Duffy et al. 2021) researching attitudes towards inequality in the UK, conducted during the covid-19 pandemic, found that most Britons believe that the main drivers of success are hard work and ambition and that, even during the pandemic, job losses were more likely to be the result of personal failure rather than circumstances beyond one's control.

However, what puts this discussion at the heart of the study of anti-populism is that populism is seen by elites as the main threat to meritocracy: '[w]hat makes populism truly dangerous, our modern-day anti-populist experts concur, is that it refuses to acknowledge the hierarchy of meritocratic achievement' (Frank 2020: 47). The disregard of meritocracy is seen as scandalous by anti-populists. A perfect illustration of this can be found in the controversy around educational reform in the Greek school system in 2017, introduced by the then-governing populist SYRIZA. The controversy in question was actually focused on a rather minor issue, namely a change to the selection of students who would be flagbearers in school events. While the student with the highest marks had been, until then, the one to carry the national flag in all formal events, SYRIZA introduced a new system according to which the flagbearer would be chosen by lot. The rationale was that, since bearing the flag is about expressing patriotism, then every student should be equally eligible to carry the national symbol; selection should not be determined by performance. Right-wing Nea Dimokratia saw this as a major moral transgression, a general praising of mediocrity and lack of ambition.

They issued a press release condemning the reform as destructive for the youth because of its anti-meritocratic spirit:

> The country's future generations cannot progress in life if they are evaluated on the basis of chance and gambling […]. Chance, gambling, worthlessness, the logic of minimal effort are SYRIZA's and Mr Tsipras's philosophy of life (Nea Dimokratia 2017).

When Kyriakos Mitsotakis (the incumbent PM), as newly appointed leader of Nea Dimokratia, unleashed against populism in his party's annual conference in 2016, he associated 'leveling egalitarianism' with the 'political extremes' who are 'hostile to meritocracy and the rewarding of hard work' (Mitsotakis 2016).

However, meritocracy works in the opposite direction to any meaningful understanding of egalitarianism. As Lasch put it:

> The notion that egalitarian purposes could be served by the "restoration" of upward mobility betrayed a fundamental misunderstanding. High rates of mobility are by no means inconsistent with a system of stratification that concentrates power and privilege in a ruling elite. Indeed, the circulation of elites strengthens the principle of hierarchy, furnishing elites with fresh talent and legitimating their ascendancy as a function of merit rather than birth (Lasch 1996: 77).

The irony about 'meritocracy' is that, when the term was coined for the first time by British sociologist Michael Young, it was intended to have a negative connotation. In his novel, *The Rise of the Meritocracy,* published in 1958, meritocracy is the name of an imagined dystopian future society in which traditional hierarchies based on social class will be replaced by a hierarchy of merit. The meritocratic society will be based on the distinction between a merited elite controlling power and the meritless multitudes excluded from it. Because factors other than talent and effort will be excluded from determining the distribution of wealth and position, and because everyone will be given the same opportunities to succeed, these outcomes will be just. Any resulting inequality, therefore, cannot be challenged on moral grounds. When meritocracy was adopted by Tony Blair as a banner for New Labour's vision, Young reacted:

> They [the poor] can easily become demoralised by being looked down so woundingly by people who have done well for themselves. It is hard indeed in a society that makes so much of merit to be judged as having none. No underclass has ever been left as morally naked as that. […] If meritocrats believe, as more and more of them are encouraged to, that their advancement comes from their own merits, they can feel they deserve whatever they can get. They can be insufferably smug […]. (Young 2001).

In that sense, the corrosive effects of meritocratic ideology extend beyond its function as a principle of distribution, since meritocracy is also a narrative about moral worth. If everyone has access to the same opportunities and some end up doing well while others do not, then the less successful can only blame themselves. As Michael Sandel (2020: 28) claims in his recent

book on the topic, '[a]mong the winners, it [the meritocratic ethic] generates hubris; among the losers, humiliation and resentment. These moral sentiments are at the heart of the populist uprising against elites'. And this is not something that only makes sense argumentatively; it is also empirically evidenced. One of the strongest political divides in many western countries today is the one between those with and those without university degrees (Sandel 2020: 26). Furthermore, support for populist parties is strongly driven by feelings of humiliation stemming from a sense of low social status, i.e., being categorised as 'non-meritorious' – without high educational credentials, a prestigious job, or any other meritocratic 'success' (Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2021). Class discontent is overtaken by an even more powerful status discontent; the feeling of being seen as unworthy and looked down at. The distinction between the worthy and unworthy that the 'merit test' results to, is often evident in politicians' discourse. Hilary Clinton, commenting on the 2016 US presidential election result, noted:

> I won the places that represent two-thirds of America's gross domestic product [...] So I won the places that are optimistic, diverse, dynamic, moving forward. And his [Trump's] whole campaign, 'Make America Great Again', was looking backwards. (Clinton in Axios 2018).

When Donald Trump was applauded by a crowd of supporters after telling them 'I love the poorly educated', many liberal commentators and social media users rushed to mock his statement, as well as the applause. They failed to recognise the sentiment of vindication after decades of growing meritocratic scorn and humiliation.

Technocracy and the Hollowing Out of Democracy

In the beginning of January 2017, a New Yorker cartoon widely circulated on social media, triggering discussion. The cartoon depicts a man standing in his seat on an airplane. Addressing the rest of the passengers, he says: 'these smug pilots have lost touch with ordinary passengers like us. Who thinks I should fly the plane?'. Several passengers are depicted with raised hands, indicating agreement with the man (McPhail 2017). The cartoon mocks what is seen as an expression of the political ideology that took over US politics after the 2016 elections, i.e., populism.

A typical accusation liberal anti-populists deploy against populism is that it has no respect for specialists and expert knowledge. This claim very closely resembles Plato's critique of democracy. The governing of a state, Plato argued in his famous 'ship of state' allegory, is like the commanding of a ship, i.e., an art that requires specific skills and knowledge – not a job for any ordinary individual. In Plato's ship (state), the sailors (the demagogue politicians democracy fosters) attempt to lure and intoxicate the deaf and short-sighted captain (the sovereign people with their weak judgement) in order to get his authorisation to command the ship, while dismissing the navigator (the expert) as a useless 'stargazer', although he is the only one with the knowledge required for commanding the ship through storms and dangerous waters. This is the hubris the populists are accused of today, too, especially in times of economic crisis. Indeed, many centuries after Plato, it is impressive how closely the New Yorker cartoon mirrors his allegory.

Not taking into account the forecasts of experts (usually economists today, but also others), the populists seem to be selling us a recipe for disaster. Anti-populists take up the task of

salvaging not only their countries from populist incompetence but also the people from themselves, when needed – when they get misguided to support expert-defying agendas.

Plato's support for expert government in the form of the Philosopher King was in line with his outright rejection of democracy. Today's anti-populists, though, seem to want to have their cake and eat it, too: they favour technocratic rule while also presenting themselves as true democrats – denouncing populists as phoney supporters of democracy. Behind this confrontation between populists and anti-populists seems to lie a crucial conflict between fundamentally different conceptions of democracy. Technocracy can only be compatible with the thinnest of the theories of democracy – often known as the 'competitive elitist' model of democracy where:

> the only full participants are the members of political elites in parties and in public offices. The role of ordinary citizens is not only highly delimited, but it is frequently portrayed as an unwanted infringement on the smooth functioning of 'public' decision-making. All this places considerable strain on the claim of 'competitive elitism' to be democratic (Held 2006: 156).

Or, as Stavrakakis (2017: 9) puts it, democracy is 'good but only to the extent that the demos would obey the commands of "responsible" technocrats who always know better'.

Technocracy is then another crucial feature of anti-populism; it is closely linked to meritocracy – maybe even an extension of it. They are both grounded on the credentials that

justify the status of political and economic elites. If meritocracy is about getting right the distinction between the deserving and the undeserving, and allocating wealth and esteem accordingly, technocracy is about who should qualify to have a say and decide on the important matters. As such, then, the technocratic turn has been seen by many scholars as a worrying development from a democratic point of view (Crouch 2004; Sandel 2018). Over the decades, though, it has been constructed as a something unavoidable, even as a *need*. Political elites have been increasingly supporting the line that the issues at the heart of current affairs are of a predominantly technical nature:

Most of us are conditioned for many years to have a political viewpoint – Republican or Democratic, liberal, conservative, or moderate. The fact of the matter is that most of the problems […] that we now face are technical problems, are administrative problems. They are very sophisticated judgments... [T]hey deal with questions which are now beyond the comprehension of most men […] (John Kennedy in Lasch 1979: 77).

Commenting on the above, Christopher Lasch says that, in that speech, Kennedy

proclaimed the end of ideology in words that appealed to both these public needs – the need to believe that political decisions are in the hands of dispassionate, bipartisan experts and the need to believe that the problems experts deal with are unintelligible to laymen (Lasch 1979: 77).

The 'Third Way' orientation of the 1990s – energised by the collapse of 'actually existing socialism' – explicitly promoted the idea that ideological clashes – notably the clash between right and left – are finally over, and that liberal capitalism was now the only game in town. Partisan politics should, then, give way to a politics of consensus at the centre. Given that the big and contentious issues were taken to be resolved, consensus politics also allowed the transfer of a great deal of decision-making power to bureaucrats and technocrats appointed in various offices.

A technocratic vision of politics seems, initially, to be a promising option. Its promise is precisely that it liberates us from the ambiguity politics has traditionally been rife with, as well as with passion and bipartisanship, which can often become bitter antagonisms facilitating pernicious polarization – aspects that have many times given political encounters a traumatic twist. There are, however, good reasons to be suspicious of this promise, from a democratic point view. Thinkers as diverse as Colin Crouch (2004) and Chantal Mouffe (2005) have highlighted that democracies have to offer the possibility of choice amongst genuine alternatives, something that tends to disappear when achieving consensus becomes the main goal. This has led to a gradual 'hollowing out' of democratic institutions; first and foremost, of the institution that played the key role in democratic competition, the political party. As Peter Mair (2013) has described it, the convergence of the agendas of big parties, and their prioritisation of technocratic 'good governance', has made citizens lose interest in the parties, something seen in the decline in voter turnout since the 1990s. At the same time, the decline and shrinking of the mass party has led to the withdrawal of political elites from party influence, getting legitimacy and support through institutions and offices further from the reach of popular control.

Crouch, in particular, has warned that the West is sliding towards an arrangement he describes as 'post-democratic':

> [A] situation where all the institutions of democracy – elections, changes of government, free debate, rule of law – continue, but they become a charade, because democratic institutions have been surpassed as major decision-making entities by small groups of financial and political elites (Crouch 2016).

While there is a series of factors contributing to post-democracy, technocracy is definitely amongst the major ones. There is no doubt that governance involves a series of issues that require specialised knowledge that we would like to consult. But recognising and consulting expertise is one thing, and technocracy is quite another: 'Conducting our public discourse as if it were possible to outsource moral and political judgment to markets, or to experts and technocrats, has emptied democratic argument of meaning and purpose' (Sandel 2020: 31). To return to the cartoon this section started with, we should trust the pilots with flying the plane, but we would not authorise them to choose the destination on our behalf. The anti-populist caricaturing is often based on the blurring of such distinctions. In a similar vein, political theorist Ernesto Laclau has offered a sharp exposure of what is at stake in the dismissal of populism:

> What is involved in such a disdainful rejection is, I think, the dismissal of politics *tout court*, and the assertion that the management of community is the concern of an

administrative power whose source of legitimacy is a proper knowledge of what a 'good' community is. […] 'Populism' was always linked to a dangerous excess, which puts the clear-cut moulds of a rational community into question (Laclau 2005).

Ultimately, anti-populism's most distinctively ideological function, as seen in its favouring of technocratic politics, is the attempt to conceal the irreducible ambiguity at the very core of politics, for which there are no *a priori*, pre-political solutions. This brings anti-populism in conflict with the democratic ethos, which is founded precisely on the acceptance of this ambiguity, and the need to engage with it politically – something that cannot be superseded by technocratic credentials and virtue. 'Democracy is the paradoxical government of those who do not embody any title for governing the community', as Jacques Rancière so succinctly expressed this idea (Rancière et al. 2000).

Conclusion

This chapter attempted to make the case for anti-populism as a distinct political discourse and tendency. As populism's 'other', it requires the attention of populism scholars, especially since populism and anti-populism are entangled in a dialectical relation in which one evolves through its conflict with the other. Seen from historical perspective, this conflict encompasses the emergence of mass politics and the place of the masses in social and political life, anti-populism representing the suspicious and often hostile stance towards the masses. Anti-populism has become particularly relevant today, given the frequency with which the political mainstream (the liberal centre) has been attacking populism in order to delegitimise the various forms of contestation of the status quo. The chapter thus attempted to grasp and critically assess the normative and ideological grounds on which these delegitimization

attempts are based today. In doing this, meritocracy and technocracy were identified as interrelated normative visions and argumentative repertoires, whose logics were deemed problematic and largely in conflict with the values officially espoused by our political systems (including the status quo forces themselves), namely egalitarianism and democracy. It is, indeed this intensifying conflict that anti-populism attempts to mask through the 'populism' scare:

> Populism is the convenient name under which is dissimulated the exacerbated contradiction between popular legitimacy and expert legitimacy, that is, the difficulty the government of science has in adapting itself to manifestations of democracy and even to the mixed form of representative system (Rancière 2014).

While we do not have to – and, most definitely, should not – take *all* expressions of populism as sound, anti-populist appeals to merit and technical expertise as fundamental norms should be resisted as anti-democratic. We should also not forget that in many of these expressions, and definitely in the – historically – most exemplary ones, populist struggles have encapsulated perhaps the most essential aspect of democracy, its 'redemptive' dimension, as Margaret Canovan called it. The banishment of populism *as such* from democracy, then, and thus the reduction of democracy to 'governance', 'is rather like trying to keep a church going without faith' (Canovan 1999: 16).

References

Axios (2018) 'Hillary's New Stat: I Won Districts Representing 2/3 of U.S. GDP'. *Axios*, 13

March. Online: https://www.axios.com/2018/03/13/hillary-clinton-india-two-thirds-
gdp-trump [last accessed 02/11/2022].

Blair, T. (2001) 'Tony Blair's First Keynote Speech of the Campaign'. *The Guardian*, 13

May. Online: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2001/may/13/labour.tonyblair
[last accessed 02/11/2022].

Blair. T. (1999) 'Blair Hails Middle Class Revolution'. *The Guardian*, 15 January. Online:

https://www.theguardian.com/politics/1999/jan/15/uk.politicalnews1 [last accessed

02/11/2022].

Bloodworth, J. (2016) *The Myth of Meritocracy: Why Working-Class Kids Still Get Working-*

Class Jobs. London: Biteback Publishing.

Bukodi, E. and Goldthorpe, J. (2021) 'Meritocracy and Populism: Is There a Connection?*'.*

UK in a Changing Europe, Working Paper 01/2021. Online:

https://policycommons.net/artifacts/1964852/meritocracy-and-populism-is-there-a-
connection-erzsebet-bukodi-and-john-h/2716617/ [last accessed 02/11/2022].

Cambridge Dictionary (2017) 'Cambridge Dictionary's Word of the Year 2017'. *About*

Words: A Blog from Cambridge Dictionary, 29 November. Online:

https://dictionaryblog.cambridge.org/2017/11/29/cambridge-dictionarys-word-of-the-
year-2017/ [last accessed 03/05/2022].

Cameron, D. (2012) 'Conservative Party Conference 2012 in Birmingham: Full Transcript of

David Cameron's Speech'. *The Independent*, 10 October. Online:

https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/conservative-party-conference-2012-
in-birmingham-full-transcript-of-david-cameron-s-speech-8205536.html [last

accessed 02/11/2022].

Canovan, M. (1999) 'Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy'. *Political Studies*, *47*(1), 2-16.

Crouch, C. (2004) *Post-Democracy.* Cambridge: Polity.

Crouch, C. (2016) *Viewpoint: Post-Democracy, Post-Brexit – An Interview with Colin Crouch*. Online: https://archive.discoversociety.org/2016/11/01/viewpoint-post-democracy-post-brexit-an-interview-with-colin-crouch/ [last accessed 02/11/2022].

Crouch, C. (2019) *Will the Gig Economy Prevail?*. Cambridge: Polity.

D'Eramo, M. (2013) 'Populism and the New Oligarchy'. *New Left Review*, 82, 5-28.

Duffy, B., Hewlett, K., Hesketh, R., Benson, R. and Wager, A. (2021) *Unequal Britain: Attitudes to Inequalities After Covid-19.* https://doi.org/10.18742/pub01-043.

Frank, T. (2020) *The People, No: A Brief History of Anti-Populism*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Galanopoulos, A. and Venizelos, G. (2021) 'Anti-Populism and Populist Hype During the COVID-19 Pandemic'. *Representation,* 58(2), 251-268.

Held, D. (2006) *Models of Democracy.* Cambridge: Polity.

Katsambekis, G. and Stavrakakis, Y. (2020) 'Populism and the Pandemic: A Collaborative Report'. *Populismus Interventions*, No 7. Online: http://populismus.gr/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/interventions-7-populism-pandemic-UPLOAD.pdf [last accessed 02/11/2022].

Kunovich, S. and Slomczynski, K. M. (2007) 'Systems of Distribution and a Sense of Equity: A Multilevel Analysis of Meritocratic Attitudes in Post-Industrial Societies'. *European Sociological Review*, 23(5), 649-663.

Laclau, E. (2005) *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso.

Lasch, C. (1979) *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations.* New York: WW Norton & Company.

Lasch, C. (1996) *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy.* New York: WW Norton & Company.

Littler, J. (2017) *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility.* London: Routledge.

Mair, P. (2013) *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*. London: Verso.

Markovits, D. (2019) *The Meritocracy Trap.* London: Penguin.

Marlière, P. (2013) 'The Demophobes and the Great Fear of Populism'. *openDemocracy*, 4 June. Online: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/demophobes-and-great-fear-of-populism/ [last accessed 02/11/2022].

May, T. (2016) 'Britain, the Great Meritocracy: Prime Minister's Speech'. GOV.UK, 9 September. Online: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/britain-the-great-meritocracy-prime-ministers-speech [last accessed 02/11/2022].

McPhail, W. (2017) 2 January. Online: https://twitter.com/willmcphail/status/815899174474567680 [last accessed 02/11/2022].

Mitsotakis, K. (2016) 'Address by Nea Dimokratia's President, Mr Kyriakos Mitsotakis, in Nea Dimokratia's 10th National Congress'. 22 April. Online: https://nd.gr/nea/omilia-toy-proedroy-tis-neas-dimokratias-k-kyriakoy-mitsotaki-sto-10o-taktiko-ethniko-synedrio [last accessed 02/11/2022].

Moffitt, B. (2018) 'The Populism/Anti-Populism Divide in Western Europe'. *Democratic Theory*, *5*(2), 1-16.

Mouffe, C. (2005) *On the Political.* London: Routledge.

Mudde, C. and Kaltwasser, C. R. (2012) 'Populism and (Liberal) Democracy: a Framework for Analysis'. In: Mudde C and Kaltwasser, C. R. (eds) *Populism in Europe and the*

Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1-26.

Nea Dimokratia (2017) 'Chance and Rule by the Unworthy are Mr Tsipras's Philosophy of Life'. 3 August. Online: https://nd.gr/deltia-tipou/i-tyhi-kai-i-anaxiokratia-filosofia-zois-toy-k-tsipra [last accessed 02/11/2022].

Rancière, J. (2014) *Hatred of Democracy.* London: Verso.

Rancière, J., Guenoun, S., Kavanagh, J. H. and Lapidus, R. (2000) 'Jacques Ranciere: Literature, Politics, Aesthetics: Approaches to Democratic Disagreement'. *SubStance* *29*(2), 3-24.

Rancière, J. (2017) 'Attacks on "Populism" Seek to Enshrine the Idea That There is No Alternative'. *Verso Blog*, 02 May. Online: https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3193-attacks-on-populism-seek-to-enshrine-the-idea-that-there-is-no-alternative [last accessed 03/05/2022].

Sandel, M. J. (2018) 'Populism, Liberalism, and Democracy'. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, *44*(4), 353–359.

Sandel, M. J. (2020) *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* London: Penguin.

Sawhill, I. V. and Pulliam, C. (2019) 'Six Facts About Wealth in the United States'. Online: https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2019/06/25/six-facts-about-wealth-in-the-united-states/ [last accessed 02/11/2022].

Standing, G. (2011) *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class.* London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Stavrakakis, Y. (2017) 'How Did "Populism" Become a Pejorative Concept? And Why Is This Important Today? A Genealogy of Double Hermeneutics'. *Populism in Theory: Towards an Anthropological Frame workshop,* Universidad de Barcelona.

Stavrakakis, Y. and Katsambekis, G. (2019) 'The Populism/Anti-Populism Frontier and Its

Mediation in Crisis-Ridden Greece: From Discursive Divide to Emerging Cleavage?'.

European Political Science, 18(1), 37-52.

Stavrakakis, Y., Katsambekis, G., Kioupkiolis, A., Nikisianis, N. and Siomos, T. (2018)

'Populism, Anti-Populism and Crisis'. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 17(1), 4-27.

Sunak R (2021) 13 February. Online:

https://twitter.com/RishiSunak/status/1360526121801023488 [last accessed

02/11/2022].

Young, M. (2001) 'Down with Meritocracy'. *The Guardian*, 29 June. Online:

https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2001/jun/29/comment [last accessed

03/05/2022].