A Global Crisis of Liberal Democracy?

On Autocratic Democracy, Populism and Post-Truth Politics

Abstract

This article proposes that autocratic democracy represents the natural political form of right-wing populism. It argues that while the emergence of autocratic democracy as a genuine political alternative to liberal democracy may be currently located primarily in states where liberal democratic norms were not well-consolidated, there are reasons to hold that structural features of contemporary politics in consolidated democracies relating to the decline of mass parties and the globalisation trilemma create the space for the right-wing mobilisation of populism. It is further claimed that the dilemmas of the EU in conjunction with the politics of immigration and multiculturalism provide resources for the right-wing mobilisation of populist discontents such that we should not be sanguine about the ability of liberal democracy to be resilient in the face of continuing populist pressures.

Keywords: Autocratic, Democracy, Populism, De-legitimation, European Union, Popular Sovereignty.

Author Bio: David Owen is Professor of Social and Political Philosophy at the University of Southampton. He has published widely on issues of migration, of democratic theory, and post-Kantian social and political philosophy. His most recent book is *What do we owe to refugees?* (Polity 2020). Email: [dowen@soton.ac.uk](mailto:dowen@soton.ac.uk)

Is there a global crisis of liberal democracy? A sceptical response to this question could argue that populist leaders like Erdoğan, Orbán, Duterte and Modi ‘have taken advantage of contexts in which democratic norms and values were weak to begin with’ (Corbett, 2019: 7, cf. Dawson and Hanley, 2016). On this sceptical view, as Corbett notes:

the trend towards a global crisis is much less compelling than it first appears and we should be more cautious in our assessments. Given the gains democracy made in the last century, it is just as likely that this is a minor bump on the road to ever expanding democratic freedoms. (2019: 6-9).

A more sobering view is offered by Keane’s (2020) analysis of ‘the new despotism’ and, consonant with this view, I will argue that we have reasons to be more concerned than the sceptical response suggests and to take the claim of a trend towards a global crisis of liberal democracy seriously. In particular I will argue that we are seeing the emergence of a distinctive political form ‘autocratic democracy’ to which right-wing populism has a strong elective affinity.

I’ll proceed in four steps. The first sketches out an account of the liberal democratic state in terms of a set of institutions and norms whose function is, put negatively, to protect against autocratic rule and, put positively, to enable *civil* transformations of the structure and content of political rule, that is, transformations of the polity that are not dominated by, or dependent on, the use of violence. The second argues that the early 21st century has seen the emergence of a political form: *autocratic democracy* in which the formal trappings of the constitutional democratic state are maintained but the substance of political rule becomes autocratic, embedded in the figure of the leader as the personification of the interests of the people. Although this focus on the figure of the leader can be seen in the ideology and practice of earlier forms of authoritarian state, it is – I think – a distinctive feature of autocratic democracy that these leaders are careful to sustain the formal appearance of democratic propriety and to do so even at some political risk. Vladimir Putin’s decision to comply with Russian constitution and step down as President after two terms, to then serve as Prime Minister until he became eligible to be President again, was a political calculation that was not wholly without risk. More recently, the decision by Turkey’s President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to abide by the outcome of the re-run election for the Istanbul mayoral position represents a political gamble given its potential implications for his ability to sustain his patronage networks. While the demand that the election be re-run on the basis of supposed irregularities and the closeness of the first vote could be given ‘democratic cover’, the size of the second majority removed this option leaving a choice between acceptance and flagrant public breach of formal democratic norms. That Erdogan chose the former at a political cost which could prove to be significant is indicative of the legitimation role that compliance with the formal features of democracy plays in this type of polity. In the third step, I will propose that ‘autocratic democracy’ can be seen as the political form to which contemporary populism has an elective affinity. The final stage of my argument offers reasons for seeing the threat posed by populism and autocratic democracy as a real one even in the context of those states – North American and European liberal democracies – that look best placed to resist it.

**The Liberal Democratic State as a Political Form**

In taking up the liberal democratic state as a political form, it is important, first, not to provide too abstract or idealised an account of this type of polity and, second, not to focus solely on the internal politics of this state eliding its external conduct as a political actor in international politics. In order to meet these desiderata, I adopt a reconstructive approach in which I propose an account of the liberal democratic state as a political form that provides limited conditions for ‘liberalisation’ and ‘democratization’ on the basis of popular demands expressed in social and political movements.

Let me begin with two prefatory points about political power when viewed from an agent-centered perspective, namely, that power is a *positional* good and that the ‘agent’ who exercises power is not individuated in advance of the context of political contest. The first point notes that how much political power an agent can effectively exercise over others is conditional on the distribution of political power (as well as background conditions). The second point draws our attention to the point that the relevant agent can be, for example, an individual, a coalition, a movement or a state – and the relative power of agents depends on the form that agency takes in contexts of political contest. Taken together, these points account for the two most basic rules of political power. From the standpoint of the oppressor: Divide and rule. From the standpoint of the oppressed: In unity, strength. Thus, a key issue concerns the extent to which the background structures of social and political society enable, obstruct or undermine conditions of collective action by those subject to rule – and it is in terms of this issue that we can begin to address the imperfect and fragile political form that is the liberal democratic state.

Turning first to the internal dimensions, we can note that the emergence of the modern state and what would become ‘liberal’ thinking in Europe is inseparable from the confessional conflicts that devastated European society leading initially to the Peace of Ausberg (1555) and after renewed conflict in the staggering violence of the Thirty Years War to the Peace of Westphalia (1648). This gave rise, in limited form, to the norm of freedom of religion and the scars of conflict motivated the discourse of religious toleration as a part of the emerging European state system. Further, while the limitation of the monarch’s sovereignty in relation to religious belief was a key site for the emergence of liberal political thought and indicates what will be a central tenet of liberal thinking, namely, the acknowledgement and affirmation of *pluralism* embedded in freedom of conscience, the centralisation of coercive power in the state apparatus under a monarchical sovereign also gave rise to a second strand of liberal thought, namely, the rule of law. The demand is that those who exercise rule and their agents should exercise their power within a constraining framework of legally established public norms rather than through arbitrary dictats issued on the basis of discretionary powers. Governing must be situated within a comprehensive framework of law and accountable though law for its legitimate expression. At the same, the rule of law requires that citizens comply with legitimately established legal norms regardless of their agreement with these norms and that they respect legal determination of their rights and duties. This requires that the law should be the same for everyone, that no one is above the law, and that everyone has access to the law’s protection. Meeting these requirements, ensuring that the law is epistemically accessible as public knowledge and practically accessible to all those subject to legal judgments, entails an independent judiciary and integrity of legal procedures to secure the transparency and accountability of governmental action.

From the early seventeenth century onwards, the concern to subject the rule of monarchical sovereignty to laws that prevented arbitrary and discretionary exercise of power was bound up with the doctrines of individual natural rights (limits to legitimate state power) and the separation of powers (obstructing concentration of power) in the articulation of a conception of ‘constitutional government’ that is central to what was to become ‘liberal democracy’. As the example of the English civil war illustrates, this was not a simple process and it was one that required building coalitions across classes. It was also importantly the site at which the idea of ‘the people’ as the locus of sovereignty was first mobilised to legitimate the limitation of absolutist monarchical rule and support limited forms of representative government. The combination of the ideas of popular sovereignty and natural rights would receive political expression in the American and French Revolutions, and in the French case provide the basis for the identification of popular sovereignty with the figure of the nation as a site of collective identification.

Two further elements were central to this struggle against autocratic rule and the reach and forms of state power. The first arose in relation to the state’s power to censor public speech. The invention of the printing press and rising literacy levels had made the issue of public (particularly religious) speech into a major governmental issue in the seventeenth century, not least with the emergence of pamphleteering and other news media. This was a central issue in the English civil war, which provided an example of a period without censorship, and received early defence by the republican poet John Milton but it was not until that late eighteenth century in Sweden (1766) and the USA (1791) that freedom of expression and, as a corollary, a free press received clear legal protection. The second arose in relation to the state’s power to regulate public space and concerned the right of assembly for purposes of peaceful protest that was a site of struggle throughout the eighteenth century and received its first legal guarantee in the 1776 Pennsylvania Declaration of Rights.

With all of these developments in place, even if in limited imperfect ways, we have the emergence of the liberal democratic state as a political form characterised by freedoms of conscience, of expression and of peaceful assembly, along with a free press, the rule of law, the separation of powers, representative government, a commitment to acknowledging the people as sovereign, but also to the sovereignty of states and to the idea of national community.

I have highlighted these elements for three reasons. The first is that doing so draws attention to the importance of acknowledging and affirming the fact of pluralism in liberal societies – pluralism in terms of religious and political beliefs was conceived as the normal condition of a free society. The second is that it highlights the point that liberal democracy emerged from the struggle against autocratic rule and is to be conceived first and foremost in terms of its ability to protect individuals and groups from the arbitrary exercise of power, particularly by governments and state officials. The third is that these features can be seen as making available, however imperfectly, a form of politics in which those subject to rule can coherently conceive of themselves as able to transform the terms and content of rule without recourse to violent insurrection – and they can do so because these features provide conditions that enable both the formation of a pluralistic civil society through which communication between society and state is conducted and collective action by social actors. This does not, of course, mean that such struggles are easy nor that there are not powerful agents able to mobilise power against them, including state power. But in limiting the discretionary use of state power and making the use of state power into a political issue requiring justification, these features make it possible for disadvantaged, oppressed and marginalized groups to mobilise for political change without the costs of doing so necessarily being so high that their only realistic choices are acquiescence, exit or violent insurrection. The struggles for expansion of suffrage to the working classes and to women, the struggle for freedom of association, especially as trade unions, the struggle for health and welfare rights, and many other struggles since could take the political shapes that they did, and further expand and develop the domestic form of the liberal democratic state, because these core features provided normative resources and practical support for civil forms of collective action directed at political change.

It is important to note however that the emergence of the liberal democratic state as a European political form directed against autocratic government over citizens within the state was not in any way incompatible with the exercise of autocratic rule over non-Europeans either beyond the state or within it in the context of settler-colonial states(Mehta, 1999; Pitt, 2006). While the banning of the slave trade and eventual freeing of slaves was in some ways an achievement of liberal states, the establishment of the liberal democratic state over the course of the nineteenth century also saw the gradual development of racialised forms of nationalism and cosmopolitanism conjoined to the new imperialism in which the old settler/trade model was displaced by direct rule over native populations, the so-called ‘White Man’s Burden’. This is an aspect of the liberal democratic state that continued until the national liberation struggles of twentieth century and, in various forms, carried on in settler colonial states, and whose legacy remains embedded in the social, economic and political structures and relations of all affected contemporary states.

While the emergence of the post-WW2 human rights regime, especially since the 1970s, may be taken to represent a form of liberal cosmopolitanism that has, albeit only partly, transcended its racialised origins, it is not immune from being used as an instrument of informal imperialism in contemporary international politics. At the same time, the more recent development of multiculturalism has challenged, although not overcome, the deep rooted racialised nationalist imaginaries of liberal democratic states. I’ll return to the significance of these points in addressing the rise of right-wing populism, but for the moment let us turn our attention to the salience of these remarks for the analysis of autocratic democracy as a political form.

**Autocratic Democracy as a Political Form**

I have already drawn attention to the point that sustaining the formal appearance of democratic rule is a significant feature of autocratic democracy. It is so because saving democratic appearances is an important source of legitimation in both domestic and international politics under contemporary conditions. But equally central is the subversion of the conditions that enable democratic rule to play its protective and enabling roles. In terms of the current practices of autocratic democracy, we can identify two primary features enabling the autocratization of democracy.

The first consists of undermining the separation of powers to enhance direct and indirect forms of executive control over the political system and hence control of the patronage powers this confers. This involves eroding the independence of the judiciary – through political appointments as well as the mobilisation of popular opposition to ‘unaccountable’ judges and the cultivation of fear among members of legal profession such as civil and criminal lawyers as part of a more general restructuring to the incentives for compliance with autocratic rule. It is notable that in Putin’s Russia, Orban’s Hungary and Erdogan’s Turkey we have seen constitutional moves, government policies and extra-parliamentary actions designed to subordinate the legal profession. Autocratization also depends however on sustaining a ruling party or coalition in the legislative branch that is subordinate to, because it sees itself as dependent on, the figure of the leader and on the patronage networks the leader controls. Under such an autocratic system, a successful leader is an individual who makes the greatest number of people dependent upon the advantages that he or she can provide. Threats to their power come from networks that are independent of his or her control; hence the risk in Erdogan’s reluctant acceptance of the Istanbul mayoral outcome.

The second feature, running in parallel with this first element, is the undermining of a free independent media that can publicly challenge and criticize the autocratization of democratic rule and serve as a site for the mobilization of opposition to it and, more generally, of a public sphere as a site of the exchange of reasons in political argument. There are several elements to this process of increasing formal or informal state control of media including the imprisonment, exile or killing of journalists, and the use of economic and political power to discipline or break independent media, but also – and arguably as important – is that the conditions of what has been called ‘surveillance capitalism’ make available new and extensive resources for populist movements and governments in the form of increasingly sophisticated forms of monitoring and intervening in the public use of the internet and social media networks. That Turkey leads the way in the imprisonment of journalists may indicate both that it exemplifies autocratic democracy and the relative fragility of this political form in Turkey. But across states with populist governments or significant populist movements we also find a widespread use of social media that operates to undermine the common background of informational trust that is integral to a functioning public sphere and mobilises a wide range of rhetorical techniques to attack its opponents and recruit supporters. The Turkish journalist Ece Temelkuran in an analysis of AKP social media tactics draws attention to the use of five rhetorical techniques widely mobilised in such tactics: ad hominem arguments which attack the character of the opponent in order to discredit their argument; appeals to ignorance which assert the truth of a proposition as it has not explicitly been shown to be false; claiming truth for a proposition on the basis of widespread popular belief in it; inappropriately generalising an argument in order to claim that leads to an absurd conclusion (Temelkuran 2019: 56-7).

In the process of achieving these goals of hollowing out democracy to enable autocracy in democratic guise, it is likely that rights to freedoms of conscience, expression, assembly and association will be curtailed on the nominally defensible grounds of order and security, but once the goals have been adequately realised, the work of undermining these freedoms may be largely carried out by the prudential self-concern of individuals for whom the costs of making themselves publicly visible through speech or action are likely to become high, although not necessarily in the form of imprisonment, injury or death since loss of job and income, ostracism, performed public hostility, and house arrest may all serve as ‘soft’ measures of disincentivizing public dissent. A nice example of how opportunities for the ‘democratic’ justification of extending ‘security’ into the domain of ‘rights’ can mobilized is provided by the aftermath of the recent ‘coup’ attempt in Turkey. Human Rights Watch comments:

<EXT>The Erdoğan government’s hounding of its critics and opponents has dismantled Turkey’s rule of law framework and turned justice on its head. Turkey’s courts lack independence and have no compunction about locking up government critics or opponents while authorities subject them to bogus investigation and trials for terrorism. (Human Rights Watch 2019)

The coup attempt by a faction in the Turkish Armed Forces was, given its failure, a gift to a leader seeking to establish autocratic democracy as Turkey’s political form. Exploiting it to sell a narrative that would enable the removal and deterrence of opposition produced a situation in which ‘state security’ became a justification for the arrest of 77,000 people with over 160,000 fired from their jobs including, significantly, 2,745 more independent-minded judges.(Human Rights Watch 2019)

The cases of Putin, Orban, Erdogan and Modi represent relatively well-established projects of autocratizing democracy. But the aspiration can be also be seen in many other contexts in which ‘populist’ leaders have been elected to power – and indeed in populist movements that have yet to achieve significant electoral gains. My claim is that autocratic democracy is the political form to which populism is naturally connected. To make this argument then means turning to look at populism as ideology and movement, before finally attempting to give an account of why liberal democratic states have become increasingly vulnerable to populist movements. These are the tasks of the next two sections.

**On Populism as Ideological Form**

One central metaphor for the emergence of populism is that of the canary in the mine whose reactions disclose the presence of a potentially deadly gases, most notably the ‘silent killer’ carbon monoxide. Populism, on this view, signals the presence within the democratic body politic of otherwise hard to detect discontents, sub-political grievances, that can undermine its health or even continuing existence. Thus, for example, Rosanvallon (2008 and 2011) acutely identifies populism as a specific pathology of democratic forms of political life: ‘Populism is not just an ideology. It is a perverse inversion of the ideals and procedures of democracy.’ (Rosanvallon 2008: 265). Representative democracy is, on this view, constitutively open to the populist claim that it fails to represent the popular will, but that claim acquires traction only under circumstances in which populist political actors can leverage public resentments and discontents against established political parties and institutions. Hence the appropriate action to take is to be democratically responsive to these resentments and discontents and thereby undercut the basis of the populist appeal. This metaphor is, though, altogether too reassuring in at least two distinct ways with respect to contemporary populism. First, because it presupposes that individual liberal democratic states possess the capability to address the sources of populism’s appeal. Second, because in identifying the noxious gas with the sources of democratic discontent, it fails to register adequately that populism is not simply a vehicle through which these discontents are expressed but can serve as a medium through which they are catalysed into a wider de-legitimation narrative that further corrodes the ability of democratic actors to address the roots of the problem. While ‘spontaneous’ populist outbreaks may serve as ‘canaries’, the organisation of populist discontents as a tactic by political entrepreneurs, often supported by powerful economic actors, can transform it into a corrosive force that threatens democratic institutions. This is what we have seen in Hungary, India, Russia and Turkey.

I address this organised tactical mobilisation of populist discontents as an anti-pluralist form of politics directed at *de-legitimizing* existing justificatory narratives of rule, as *re-presenting the circumstances of rule as an account of successful domination* and as doing so by advancing the claim to express ‘the will of the people’. The ideological form of populism is characterised by two main features. The first is the invocation of the figure of an imagined people against that of an imagined elite that obstructs or frustrates the imagined popular will. What is imagined may be more or less well grounded in reality but is rarely purely or simply imaginary (the imagined as imaginary marks the point at which populism converges with conspiracy theory and this may, perhaps often does, play some role in populist thinking but is unlikely to compose its entirety). As Rosanvallon comments of populism:

<Ext> It was born out of a crisis. ... It is the meeting point between political disillusion – caused by a lack of representation, a malfunctioning democratic regime and the connection between that disillusion and social disarray, linked to the failure to resolve the social question today – and people’s increased awareness of their impotence, the absence of alternatives and the opacity of the resulting world.

From this perspective, populism can be understood as a kind of simplistic, perverse response to these difficulties. (Rosanvallon 2011)

The second feature is the claim to speak truth to power on behalf of the people so construed, to give authentic voice to the popular will. Populism can be seen in this respect as offering a counter-narrative that presents the relationship between governors and governed as unjustified or illegitimate, that appeals to the figure of the people (as the source of legitimacy) to ground its claim and to present the current circumstances of rule as an account of successful domination by an elite.

In adopting this view, I follow Mudde and Kasswalter in seeing populism as what they describe as a ‘thin-centered ideology’ (Mudde and Kasswalter 2017: 706). It is so because populism is dependent on other ideological sources for fleshing out its content and the diverse range of populisms is an indicator of the diverse contents that can be drawn on in filling in and elaborating populism. A good starting point, then, for these reflections is Mudde and Kasswalter’s empirically driven definition of populism which runs thus:

<Ext> *a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps. “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the* volonté générale *(general will) of the people* (Mudde and Kasswalter 2017: 702).

I would enter one qualification or, perhaps better, supplement to this definition, namely, a stress on the centrality of the issue of representation. The populist claim is twofold. First, that existing representatives fail to represent the popular will and do so in virtue of their relation to an elite (where they may be seen either as members or lackeys of that elite) and, hence, their inauthentic relation to the people. Second, that the populist leader, party or movement does *authentically* represent the popular will. I stress this notion of ‘authenticity’ both because it alerts us to the point that representative politics, precisely because it is representative, is constitutively open to the populist claim: populism is ‘the permanent shadow of representative politics’ (Müller 2016: 1372) - and because it discloses the fundamental political aporia of populism, namely, its need to reconcile the claim authentically to represent the popular will with a generalized suspicion of representation underwritten by the thought that the only genuine mode of democracy is plebiscitary democracy. The rhetorical tropes of populism can be seen as driven by the demand for such reconciliation. Thus, for example, the trope of representing its own utterances as expressing the unspoken common sense of everyman that others either do not dare to pronounce or deliberately disallow situates the populist leader, party or movement as the vanguard that expresses the real will of the people and in doing so enables the manipulated people to recognise their own will. This alignment of democracy and the populist leader, party or movement is part of what explains the attraction for powerful economic elites of mobilising populism as a vehicle for political change.

Thus far I have pointed to populism’s idealization of the people as a clear subject that is defined by its distinction from the ‘elites,’ as if the people were the wholesome, unified part of a society that would come together as soon as [e.g.,] cosmopolitan groups and oligarchies had been dismissed (Rosanvallon 2011).

The important point here is that populism draws its normative force from the central democratic norm of popular sovereignty but imposes a fictitious unity on the figure of the people that is problematic not because it is fictitious but because the form of unity it fashions fails to acknowledge the plurality of the people, where that acknowledgement is fundamental to liberal democracy. This denial of plurality is expressed in two further ways.

First, as hostility not only to existing representatives but also to the institutions of liberal democracy and its separation of powers more generally, notably its intermediary institutions such as the courts and an independent civil service, as sources of obstruction to, or frustration of, the exercise of popular will. An exemplary symbolic expression of this latter dimension that was given clear expression in the ‘Enemies of the People’ headline of the *Daily Mail* on 4th November 2016 when the High Court of England and Wales ruled in the *Miller* case that the United Kingdom (UK) Government required the consent of Parliament to invoke Article 50 for withdrawal from the European Union. Rather more than symbolic expression of this animus has been exhibited by populists in power as the regimes of Putin, Orban and Erdogan all illustrate.

Second, as a focus on shared identity defined against an Other: ‘Populism believes that it is a society’s identity that brings it cohesion, not the internal quality of its social relations’, where this identity ‘is always defined negatively, based on a stigmatization of those that must be rejected’ (Rosanvallon 2011). Put more fully:

<Ext>Populism claims to resolve the problem of representation by conjuring up an image of a unified, homogenous people. It radically rejects whatever it takes to be inimical to such unity and homogeneity: foreigners, enemies, oligarchy, elites. … Populists denounce “otherness” in moral terms (by vilifying the “corrupt” and “rotten”), in social terms (by condemning “elites”), and in ethnic terms (by attacking “foreigners”, “immigrants”, “minorities”, etc.). By contrast, they celebrate “the people” as unified and pure, undivided so long as outsiders are kept out. (Rosanvallon 2008: 265-66)

This is typically demonstrated in right-wing populism in the form of an appeal to the figure of ‘the people as nation’, where ‘nation’ may be an ethnically (Russian versus non Russian), religiously (Muslim versus secular, Hindu versus Muslim) or attitudinally (rooted versus cosmopolitan) inflected construction. It should be noted here that populism exploits a duality in the concept of ‘the people’ as denoting both the totality of persons and a distinct body within that totality which is not peculiar to populism but rather is a central feature of the Western political tradition (Morgan 1988).

In sum, populism can thus be viewed as a pathology or perversion of liberal democracy that, when it achieves significant levels of support, is both a threat to constitutional democracy and a symptom of a failure of existing institutions and representative agents of liberal democracy to sustain a legitimating narrative for the current practices of rule for a non-trivial portion of the demos (at present perhaps around 15-25% in most Western European states). The figure of the leader as the embodiment of the popular will is central to its negotiation of the aporia of representation that it necessarily invokes and hence its affinity to autocratic democracy as the political form in which it is supposed the popular will is given direct expression through autocratic dictat.

**The Circumstances of Legitimacy and Vulnerability to Populism: the case of Western Europe**

In the preceding section, I argued that populism as an ideology finds natural expression in autocratic democracy as a political form, but I have yet to justify my claim that populism represents a more serious threat than the sceptical narrative canvassed in the introduction to this article acknowledges. To make that case, I turn in this section to address the states of Western Europe which, as well-established and consolidated liberal democracies, can be viewed as key test cases for the potential threat posed by right-wing populism as a tactical vehicle that can be mobilised by specific elites for their own ends. Although I will also note left-wing populism as a feature of European politics, it is right-wing populism that is my focus. I begin by outlining two structural features of contemporary European politics that offer opportunities for populist actors, before turning to consider two central sites that offer resources for right-wing populism.

Liberal democracy requires agents who are capable of articulating and sustaining its legitimation narrative, where that requires establishing and drawing on resources of trust. The issue of trust or confidence in agents as representatives of the people is a critical one because the ability to sustain a legitimation narrative in the face of actions and events that call it into question may depend on drawing on the resources of trust built up by the relationship between representatives and represented over time. Here we need to recall the fact that the history of liberal democracy is a history of party democracy – and parties are the pivot on which the claims of representative politics have turned as well as being the primary political agents through which thick legitimation narratives are articulated. It is against this theoretical background that I want to reflect on the circumstances of legitimacy in contemporary politics in order to contextualize the re-emergence and forms of populism.

Let us begin with the position of parties as the agents who enact representation and articulate thick legitimation narratives. One way of approaching this issue is to note with Peter Mair that liberal democracy can be seen as balancing or conciliating ‘popular democracy’ which stresses the rule of the demos and ‘constitutional democracy’ which emphasizes, for example, the separation of powers, protection of individual right, and restrictions on executive power (Mair 2002). As Mair has argued, an important reason that this issue has become a focus of attention is because the political party as the institution that mediated popular and constitutional dimensions of representative democracy is increasingly unable to act as a vehicle of mass representation that mediates the relationship between state and society. He notes of party democracy:

<Ext>This emphasis on party as representative *and* as governor – this emphasis on party democracy - has involved a number of assumptions and beliefs about how modern democracy functioned. These have included:

(a) an acceptance that the link between voters and governments is mediated rather than being direct, with the organised political party acting as the principal mediator within the electoral channel;

(b) a belief that the electorate is characterised by a set of diverse and reasonably enduring interests which more or less compete with one another for the distribution of scarce public resources;

(c) a belief that these interests are reflected more or less faithfully in the programmes of the parties that compete for electoral support;

(d) an acceptance that the governments which are formed as a result of this process of party competition are more or less partisan, with the winners enjoying the right to pursue the programme(s) which they themselves have elaborated and with the losers being obliged to accept that their concerns may be excluded or ignored; hence, in any political solution derived through this process, there are winners and losers. (Mair 2002: 86)

Yet today these assumptions have increasingly fallen by the wayside. As Mair put it in the opening lines of his final (posthumous) book:

<Ext>The age of party democracy has passed. Although the parties themselves remain, they have become so disconnected from the wider society, and pursue a form of competition that is so lacking in meaning, that they no longer seem capable of sustaining democracy in its present form. (Mair 2013: 1)

The decline of the traditional political party and, in an important respect, of representative party democracy in the established democracies of Western Europe saw, in the 1980s and 1990s, a shift to ‘government by cartel’ marked by the collapse of meaningful differences between party programmes, which was followed by the dual (and mirrored) processes of declining citizen participation in electoral politics and the ‘withdrawal of elites’ from civil society to the realm of government and state (Mair 2013). Perhaps unsurprisingly these developments are tracked by increasingly high levels of distrust in politicians and in representative politics, even while the abstract ideal of democracy enjoys overwhelming popular support (Stoker 2006).

The importance of the decline of parties and party democracy for our concern with the circumstances of legitimacy is that it has a double effect: on the one hand, it undermines what has been a central element of the legitimation narrative of liberal democracy, namely, that party democracy ensures ‘good enough’ representation of the people; while, on the other hand, it undermines the ability of what has been the central agent for articulating and sustaining this legitimation narrative to command the resources of trust needed address the legitimation problem it confronts. We can see this double effect as creating the space in which the populist counter-narrative can acquire political traction both in the form of populist movements, sometimes taking party form, and of the spread of populist themes and tropes to mainstream political parties.

The second dimension of the circumstances of legitimacy that I want to address can be brought into view by drawing on the economist Dani Rodrik’s formulation of an ‘inescapable trilemma’ for the world economy (Rodrik 2012). Rodrik’s ‘impossibility theorem’ states that we cannot fully realise democracy, national self-determination and global economic integration simultaneously, rather we can only fully realize any two of the three. It distinguishes three possible orderings:

1. *Democracy and global economic integration > national self-determination.* For example, global federalism in which democratic control tracks the scope of markets.
2. *National self-determination and global economic integration > democracy*. For example, a treaty-based construction of a World Trade Organisation that severely limits the scope and effectiveness of democratic control over global markets.
3. *Democracy and national self-determination > global economic integration*. For example, a world of state-based national economic management with capital controls.

An important point to note about the trilemma is that while it operates as an impossibility theorem with respect to ‘full’ realization of each of the three relevant ends, its political significance is to demarcate a decision space within which states in a globalising world are ineluctably situated and to draw attention to the point that the negotiation of this decision space necessarily involves trade-offs between democracy, national self-determination and global economic integration. In contemporary politics, the choices are not about which two ends to realize fully at the expense of the third, but rather about how to balance the trade-offs between them that are necessarily involved in pursuing all three ends. The importance of this trilemma for our current purposes is twofold.

First, in specifying the ‘paradox of globalisation’ confronting states, it allows us to situate populism against the background of the perceived displacement of the default priority of national self-determination and democracy in Western states and provides an analytical context in which to understand populism as the expression of the (partial) breakdown of the legitimating political narratives that have sustained ‘normal’ politics in these democratic states at least since the transformations of the 1980s and 1990s. If populism can be sensibly understood as offering de-legitimization narratives that target prevalent liberal democratic justifications of the current political order, I propose that we can identify the key fault-lines that offer opportunities for populism against the background of the emergence of the political consciousness of the condition that is given articulation in this trilemma. The thought here is that there has been a shift in how globalisation, primarily but not exclusively in its economic mode, is seen by democratic publics. Put starkly, we have shifted from a position in which globalisation was pictured primarily as an unchosen external constraint that was seen as changing the environment with which the dual goals of national self-determination and democracy were pursued. This *globalisation as fate* picture did not present economic globalization as a choice shaped by the agency of states, but rather as both a threat and an opportunity to which states, individually or jointly, were constrained to respond. This picture is reflected in the political convergence of parties from the mid-1980s into the 1990s described as ‘government by cartel’. However, this picture has broken down amidst growing public awareness of the ways in which state actions and choices shape the nature, extent and form of economic globalisation. This emerges from the development of political debates around global finance and global trade regimes that were intensified by the 2008 crash – and perhaps particularly by the responses of governments to that crash. But if the nature, extent and form of globalisation is no longer pictured as unavoidable fate, as something that shapes states but is not fundamentally shaped by states, but rather as something which states – especially wealthy Western states – actively shape through their choices, then the circumstances of legitimation change. So, for example, a range of phenomena that were seen as effects of globalisation to varying degree across Western states - increased immigration, sharply rising levels of inequality, increasing levels of insecurity in employment, declining welfare state provision – now appear not merely as ‘unchosen’ products of state responses to globalisation but as effects (and constituents) of state choices in shaping economic globalization. In this context, in which global economic integration is now construed as one goal alongside national self-determination and democracy, a legitimation narrative is required to justify the representational claim of these choices and trade-offs, to explain why those who have been (or perceive themselves as being) not only disadvantaged but also effectively ignored should continue to support the institutions and practices of ‘normal politics’ that have given rise to this condition.

Second, this legitimation demand is sharpened and focused in the context of the European Union (EU) and, in particular, the shift from the Treaty of Rome marked by the Single European Act (1987) and the transformation of the European Community (EC) into the European Union with the Treaty of Maastricht (1993) and its further development in the Treaties of Amsterdam (1999), Nice (2003) and Lisbon (2009). It is so because the EC/EU is itself both a response to paradox of globalisation, one which seeks to strengthen the capacity of states to negotiate the trilemma through joint action, and itself an institutionalised exemplar of the trilemma at the regional level. This matters for two reasons. First, the legitimating narratives of member states of the EU have to encompass that membership in seeking to justify the institutions and rules to which their populations are subject. Second, because the EU cannot avoid being itself a trade-off between economic integration, democracy and national self-determination, this leaves it open to populist discontents expressed as the claim that its current constitution is the expression of, and enables, an elite betrayal of the sovereign people as nation or as class. To integrate this into the preceding discussion, we can locate both the Single European Act and the Treaty of Maastricht as coinciding with the period of ‘government by cartel’ and the political picture of *globalisation as fate* against which a consensus, both permissive and passive, for elite-led EU integration operated. Against this background, the changes to the EC and the transformation to the EU could be situated in a legitimation narrative as protective measures against the uncontrolled forces of globalisation designed to support the interests of their peoples by increasing governmental capacity and resilience through pooling sovereignty. The difficulty of sustaining this legitimation narrative was already apparent in the run up to what became the Treaty of Lisbon and has fairly decisively collapsed following the EU’s response to the 2008 financial crisis and the ensuing Eurozone and Greek Debt crises.

This provides an analytical context in which to situate the populism in the ‘old Europe’ states of the EU. In the case of right-wing populists, the crux is representation of the EU as an institution those ordering represents the *de-prioritizing* of national self-determination against economic integration and democracy. This is expressed in, for example, populist representations of the elite as ultimately committed to a project of EU federalism that will effectively downgrade national self-determination to a position akin to that of sub-national governance within states (and how threatening that perception is may be significantly mediated by the structure of sub-national governance within particular states). In the case of left-wing populists, the representation of the EU pivots on the perceived *prioritizing* of economic integration over democracy and national self-determination. This is expressed most radically in the pro-Brexit leftwing claims that the EU is constitutionally neoliberal (Tortolano 2016; Elliott, 2016; Guinan and Hanna, 2017). The differences between right-wing and left-wing populisms have implications for the range of ways in which they stand towards the possibility of a legitimate EU. While both can take radically Eurosceptic forms, right-wing populism can also adopt views that affirm the EU as a trading bloc whilst arguing that its post-Maastricht form represents the key moment of elite betrayal, and left-wing populisms have more scope for calling for the prioritizing of democracy which can potentially take a diverse range of forms. In general, the EU can serve populists of both left and right as a target and this helps to explain a notable finding of a recent Pew Research Center analysis of European populism that while left/right ideological differences were more significant that populist/non-populist attitudes in terms of party support and policy issues (and very notably so for immigration policy), one exception was attitudes towards the European Union in which populist attitudes ‘are often a more significant dividing line than ideology’ and people with populist attitudes ‘also express higher support for returning powers from the EU to their national government than those in the mainstream’ (Simmons et al. 2018: 4). The EU is, it seems, both a central target of populism and representations of the EU as an elite project that betrays the national peoples of member states are a central rhetorical resource for European populism. The EU thus serves as a key site for the political mobilisation and channelling of populist discontents – and the continuing Brexit farrago represents an important illustration of the threat that this can pose to sustaining democratic norms in a long-established constitutional democratic state.

The centrality of the idea of the people to populism immediately alerts us to one crucial dimension in distinguishing modalities of populism, namely, its construction of peoplehood and the ways in which this construction is intimately bound up with how the contrast between elite and people is specified, and the form of inauthenticity that is claimed to be manifest in the existing state of representative politics. Reflecting on this point highlights a central feature of populist movements, namely, that they are constrained to structure their claim to speak for the people by drawing on existing resources within the popular imagination in order to craft a de-legitimating narrative that underpins both their characterisation and criticism of the elite and their own claim to represent authentically. It is the topos of the people that brings us to the second key site for the political mobilisation and channelling of populist discontents, namely, the issue of immigration and multiculturalism noted earlier in the discussion of liberal democracy as a political form.

Mudde has cogently argued that the populist radical right-wing parties (PRRP’s) that have emerged within Western European states over the past thirty-plus years share at least the common features of ‘nativism, authoritarianism and populism’ (Mudde 2013: 3). For our concerns, the relevant feature is nativism, that is an ethnocultural construction of peoplehood in which specific PRRP’s may be situated at different ranges along the ethnocultural continuum from the more ‘ethnic’ to the more ‘cultural’ (while often exploiting the fact that this is a continuum to encompass racists while denying the charge of racism). This rhetorical construction of the people in ‘nativist’ terms targets immigration as the core political issue where the inauthenticity of existing representation can be most easily discerned and involves the representation of the elite as liberal/ metropolitan/ cosmopolitan, that is, as lacking an authentic relation to the nation or to national identity. It is not that PRRP’s are the architects of this conception of peoplehood but rather than that they crystallize and catalyse existing popular views concerning immigration to mobilise support:

<Ext>Minkenberg’s apt summary of the essential impact of PRRPs on European democracies … still holds good: ‘The “government of the people, by the people, for the people” is not at stake, but the concept of the “people” is’. As far as there has been influence of PRRPs on European democracies, it has been on redefining the people; or, more accurately, re-redefining the people in the manner that they had always been implicitly defined in the pre-multicultural society – namely as ethnically homogeneous. This influence has been mostly indirect and in line with the democratic process in the sense that PRRPs politicised mostly existing anti-immigrant sentiments in the population, which encouraged mainstream parties (if encouragement was needed) to adopt their issues and issue position, albeit in a more moderate form, and change policies accordingly. (Mudde 2013: 11)

It is noteworthy that the existence of PRRP’s has increased the issue-salience of immigration for political parties in general and influenced both mainstream left-wing parties development of focused immigration control policies (mainstream right-wing parties did this anyway) and mainstream right-wing parties policies on integration against a multicultural orientation (Mudde 2013: 9). Indeed, while PRRP’s may have catalysed anti-immigrant politics, the adoption of increasing restrictive immigration policies in the pre-expansion EU states predates the rise of PRRP’s suggesting not only that ‘mainstream right-wing parties are more responsible for the recent anti-immigration turn than PRRPs’ (Mudde 2013: 12) but that this turn provided fertile ground for the emergence of PRRP’s and has supported a political dynamic generating polices that were, whether substantively or symbolically, more hostile to immigration:

<Ext>While all [mainstream right-wing parties] have moved to a more strict immigration and integration position, some have chosen to use this particular issue to gain governmental power by co-opting either the populist radical right parties (e.g., Austria, Denmark, Netherlands) or their voters (e.g., France). In most of these cases, the mainstream right adopted not just a more radical immigration position, but also implemented more strict immigration policies than in other countries. (Mudde 2013: 12)

In drawing on an enthnocultural construction of the people that is widely available in public political culture and, at least in Western Europe, had already been politically cultivated by the immigration policies of traditional right-wing parties, PRRP’s are able to avail themselves of a long-standing political trope for construction of the elite as left-liberal metropolitans with cosmopolitan attitudes - ‘citizens of nowhere’ (as Theresa May somewhere put it) - divorced from the reality of the everyday lives of ‘decent people’. Moreover, the complexities of immigration policy in balancing competing imperatives of human rights, social cohesion and economic growth, the difficulties of border control in the context of contemporary global travel infrastructures, and the combination of typically weak governmental support for immigrant integration with politically strident demands for immigrants to integrate provide an issue that has fairly high political salience and is readily available as a target for channelling and focusing the anxiety of those who identify as ‘natives’. Indeed, a further advantage for right-wing populism of immigration as an issue is its polyvalence as ‘threat’ that can be simultaneously construed as an economic threat to low-paid/precarious workers, a social threat to local communities (especially in terms of public services), a cultural threat to national identity, and a value-threat to democracy. In the aftermath of 11 September 2001 and the rise of the spectre of transnational Islamicist terrorism, the convergence of PRRPs on Islamophobia (Camus and Lebourg 2017: 196-202) suggests that the latter two have found most resonance among national publics as well as enabling PRRPs to embrace socially liberal positions in presenting themselves as defenders of, for example, women and LGTB rights against the oppressive anti-modernism of ‘Islam’.

The link between these two sites of right-wing mobilisation of populist discontents - the EU and immigration/multiculturalism – is accomplished in PRRPs rhetorical construction of the EU as a top-down project driven by political and administrative elites that is a cosmopolitan project that is seen as enabling immigration, undermining national identity, and requiring sacrifices for other (undeserving) members of the Union. The emergence of the Eurosceptic *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany) in the context of the Eurozone crisis and its rapid movement from the initial opportunity offered by Greek debt crisis towards the fertile soil of Islamophobia (already adopted by France’s *Front National* (National Front, now National Rally), Austria’s *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (Freedom Party) and the Netherlands *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (Party for Freedom) in ‘old Europe’ states) that was readily available in the aftermath of Merkel’s opening of Germany to refugees exhibits each of these features. In the UK Brexit Leave campaign, immigration was the major issue (45% of the official Leave campaign advertisements were directed at immigration) and the spectre of Muslim Turkey joining the EU and of ‘77 million’ Turkish citizens enjoying free movement to the UK was stoked by campaigners such as Michael Gove (Gove 2018) and Nigel Farage (Farage 2016) amidst a general attack on EU free movement rules and handling of the ‘migrant’ (aka refugee) crisis articulated in terms of security, policing and the strain on public infrastructures. The primary reference of the slogan ‘Take Back Control’ was border control and commonly understood to be so.

If the two structural problems to which I have pointed in this section and the two key sites of right-wing mobilisation of populism are durable features of the contemporary political realm in Europe, then we have reason to take the populist challenge to be a serious threat to liberal democracy, one whose continuing presence acts as a corrosive on liberal and democratic norms in both the informal and formal public sphere. This is liable to take different forms in presidential and parliamentary systems with respect to the centrality of the figure of the leader or that of the party or the movement, but in the antics of Trump and of Johnson we can see the calculated destruction of public discourse as a site of argument conducted against a common background of facts. Moreover, the media’s increasing personalisation of politics in terms of the focus on leaders may be seen to facilitate the populist style in which the leader becomes the embodiment of the people – or of the elite.

**Conclusion**

In this article I have argued that autocratic democracy represents the natural political form of right-wing populism and that while the emergence of autocratic democracy as a genuine political alternative to liberal democracy may be currently located primarily in states where liberal democratic norms were not well-consolidated, there are reasons to hold that structural features of contemporary politics in consolidated democracies relating to the decline of mass parties and the globalisation trilemma create the space for the right-wing mobilisation of populism and that the dilemmas of EU in conjunction with the politics of immigration and multiculturalism provide resources for the right-wing mobilisation of populist discontents such that we should not be sanguine about the ability of liberal democracy to be resilient in the face of continuing populist pressures. In concluding, however, we may note that it is importantly the case that these developments take place against the background of rising inequality combined with increasingly precarious employment structures (marked by the rise of fractional jobs and the gig economy, on the one hand, and of robotics and machine-learning, on the other) and what the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) described as unprecedented wage stagnation (OECD 2018). Moreover, the effects of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis

<Ext>has wrecked untold havoc on US and European public life. Specifically, in much the same way that the great depression resulted in a hard turn to the right, the Global Financial Crisis has inflamed tensions over immigration and inequality. In time, this may taper off. But at the moment, it has added fuel to simmering tensions, themselves the result of the inequality created by unchecked globalisation, that threaten to explode in the form of rising nationalism among middle and working classes. (Corbett 2019: 5; cf. Dasnari 2018)

If we look at the Brexit vote in the UK, we find that ‘the Leave vote was not more popular among the low skilled, but rather among individuals with intermediate levels of education (A-Levels and GSCE high grades), especially when their socio-economic position was perceived to be declining and/or to be stagnant’ (Antonucci et al 2017). If we turn to the vote for Trump, similar patterns can be discerned (Wlliams 2016). What this suggests is that at least part of the constituency to which the narratives of right-wing populism are attractive could be disconnected from this movement by addressing the socio-economic conditions that make the populist narrative appear salient to them. The ability of social democratic parties to do so remains however open to question.

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