

# POPULISM & THE LEFT

## The Historical Background

Populism is very much in the news nowadays. In the media, and for much of the Left, it is a dirty word. It is portrayed as 'far right' and variously characterised by 'nativism', xenophobia, racism, homophobia, fascism, etc.

The term Populism has been around since the late 19th century. It emerged in connection with a movement in the United States, particularly among the agricultural community, which was self-described as populist. It also became manifest in a different form in Russia with the narodniks (narodnik being the Russian noun for a populist). The English word derives from the Latin for people - *populus*.

Both these movements were, to put it at its broadest, anti-establishment, although their social bases and specific demands were different.

Since then, there has been a variety of political trends in different countries which have been described by political scientists as Left Populist, to one extent or another. For example, the New Deal approach of Roosevelt has been so classified. Also, Peronism in Argentina has been placed somewhat in the same category. Right Populism was exemplified *in extremis* in the Thirties and Forties by fascism and nazism.

In Ireland, the attempt to internationally classify the parties has led to Fine Gael being designated as conservative and Labour as social democratic, while Fianna Fáil has often been referred to as populist to a certain degree and before the current international discussion of populism began. The latter was so because of FF appealing

in some measure to the lower middle-class, working class, small farmers and agricultural labourers (although the last of these has now largely disappeared, not least due to agricultural technology). At the same time, FF was and is preponderately beholden to medium and large-sized capital and finance, both domestic and foreign.

In fact, today and in the debate across the Western world, a less media tendentious and more analytical approach to the phenomenon in question explicitly refers not just to Populism, but to Right Populism and Left Populism.

## The Components

The common basis of the two populisms is to be found under a number of headings.

**POWERLESSNESS** - There are those who have given up hope of expressing their grievances and demands within society because they believe they are simply not listened to. In electoral terms, this covers people who are not registered to vote and those who registered at one point but no longer exercise the franchise. Instead of having a sense of being involved in a community and in society, there is a state of alienation and a lack of trust in the governors. The young can feel particularly affected, especially when they suffer the highest unemployment

**RESENTMENTS** - Following on from the latter, people are antagonistic towards the establishment in all its forms - traditional political parties, administrative and governing institutions, and notable centres of power such as the banks. They see them as indifferent, uncaring, exploitative and, indeed, oft-times corrupt. On occasion, the havenots even feel that they are held in sheer contempt by the elite.

**PERCEIVED THREATS** - These have been described as both vertical and horizontal. The vertical refers upwards to the elites stretching from Dublin to Brussels and the horizontal laterally to domestic minorities and immigrants.

The elite is perceived as serving only its own interest and at the expense of the less well-off. Thus, it is the cause of inequality. And it is increasingly cosmopolitan as reflected in globalisation, which is presented as enlightened and forward-looking, whereas it is really international capital without any of the controls that are exercised at the national level. Cosmopolitanism (the cultural side of globalisation) is also seen as a challenge to ethnic or national distinctiveness.

Migrants are often seen as a threat to employment because when prepared to work for substandard wages. There is also hostility to them owing to cultural differences.

Examples of domestic minorities are the Roma in Eastern Europe and Travellers in Ireland and Muslims throughout Europe.

These resentments and threats are sometimes based on reality, although some of these need to be qualified.

For example, migrants not only sometimes get jobs which Irish people are seeking for lower wages, but also often do underpaid menial work which the locals are not prepared to do and such migrants are thus frequently separated from their families in their countries of origin. In these respects, they are also the exploited.

On the cultural side, however, there is reason to be critical on occasion of the attempt to import attitudes and practices which are reactionary and inhumane. For instance, there is the position of women in particular in some cultures, involving both status and bodily integrity (being a chattel or being subjected to female genital mutilation). 'Multiculturalism' sometimes tries to gloss over these considerations. On the other hand, one has to be careful about rightful criticism sliding into downright racism. There is also the problem of migrants living in ethnic ghettos. This can further reinforce simple wariness of

difference and strangeness.

RESPONSES - Both Right and Left Populism recognise these resentments and threats, but differ sharply in the analyses and remedies put forward in connection with them.

The Right seeks to demonise Muslims, Jews, Roma, Travellers, and foreigners generally, as the case may be. It is also censorious of the elite for what it sees as pandering to minorities and ignoring the majority.

### The Traditional Left

The problem with the traditional Left lies in a number of areas. To begin with, it has failed to successfully challenge neo-liberalism at the national and international levels. It had already accepted a



compromise with capitalism in terms of Keynesian economics and the welfare state. Into the Seven-ties, this helped to deal

with un-employment and poverty up to a point. There was also a degree of redistribution of income, but this was as much to ensure purchasing power for manufactured goods and commercial services as anything else.

The underprivileged also frequently see the Left as now placing identity politics (e.g. gender issues, sexual rights, ethnic concerns, and so on) above class politics instead of them complementing the latter. In other words, such politics is perceived as the outgrowth of a cultured and educated cohort or of the trendy Left which don't have to worry about social and economic deprivation. These elements further tend to favour unrestricted immigration as a manifestation of their 'liberalism'. They are moreover prone to advocating a multiculturalism which is viewed as detracting from national distinctiveness and producing an amorphous rather than just a tolerant society.

## **Post-Keynesianism**

The 1970s saw the drift away from Keynesian economics and the welfare State towards neoliberalism and individualism. The oil crisis of the early 70s shifted the focus from consumption to supply economics, and the policy emphases became those of low inflation rather than job creation, and deregulation and privatisation instead of quality public service. Financialisation also grew whereby riches were accumulated, not on the basis of ownership of capital or meaningful provision of services, but speculation as regards currencies, credit, debt, and interest payments. Investment and production went by the way in this perspective.

The social democratic parties and trade unions, which had been partially seduced by a kind of corporatism and had come to rely unduly upon Keynesianism and welfarism, were confronted and cowed by the new regime. The ideological context was substantially assisted in these respects by the collapse of communism and the discrediting of socialism in general because of the reputation for inefficiency and corruption that had become associated with the States of Central and Eastern Europe. There was talk of a third way between socialism and capitalism, but what eventuated was a competitive centrism in which social democracy and the unions lost. On top of that, when the inevitable crises eventuated, the solution called for was 'austerity'. Progressive taxation, expenditure, investment, infrastructural development, and job creation were no longer the orders of the day.

It is not then surprising that popular discontent began to grow from the 1970s onwards and has reached a crescendo at present. The Left, however, generally seems unable to understand and react appropriately to this overall state of affairs. In other words, it has simply become out of touch and therefore has not framed the necessary approaches and demands to deal with the situation.

As a result, the Right has successfully recognised and acknowledged the feelings, attitudes and perceptions of the people and is leading them towards an authoritarian and intolerant order which will still in the main serve the interests of the elites, but guarantee less resistance to them.

## **The Alternative Populist Left**

Some political scientists have classified Sinn Féin as being an example of the Populist Left. Other such parties that they point to include Podemos in Spain and SYRIZA in Greece (although the latter has departed from its original stance).

Sinn Féin in fact is and should be a Left Populist party in that it is in touch with the people, not only coming up to elections, but also constantly in between them. It seeks to identify their legitimate concerns and propose appropriate remedies for them. It both articulates protest and endeavours to organise same as need be. It accepts that the elites in Dublin, Brussels and elsewhere (e.g. IMF, OECD etc.) are to be opposed and that their efforts to undermine the interests of the underprivileged should be frustrated. It reaffirms that it is a socialist party which needs to struggle against capitalism. It adheres to a modern socio-political analysis from a progressive point of view. It also supports reasonable demands arising from identity politics. In short, it is a voice for the voiceless - both generally and for particular groups.

In doing all this, it opposes the false interpretations and remedies offered by Right Populism in respect of popular grievances.

## **Methods of Struggle**

In all of the foregoing, one must adopt and utilise thoroughly all the modern techniques of communication and propaganda in fulfilling the purpose which progressives have set themselves. This refers both to traditional forms of activity such as leafleting, postering, canvassing, clinics, and public meetings, on the one hand, and to full exploitation of the internet, social media and the like, on the other.