



## To Define Populism

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# To Define Populism

IB participated in a conference held at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) in London under the above title from 20 to 21 May 1967.<sup>1</sup> A **précis of the conference** appeared under the same title in *Government and Opposition* 3 no. 2 (1968), 137–79, including summarised contributions by IB at **140** and **173–8**; a complete transcript of the proceedings of the conference, including more material by IB, is in the library of the LSE under the title ‘London School of Economics Conference on Populism, May 20–21, 1967: Verbatim Report’, shelfmark HN 17 C74. The papers presented at the conference (which do not include one by IB) were published in *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*, ed. Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner (London, 1969). Material by IB in the transcript follows (lightly edited). The wording in the published summary differs somewhat from that in the verbatim transcript: the latter wording is followed here, except where it is clearly mistaken (some of the mishearings are comical). For the sake of completeness all Berlin’s remarks are included, even though some of the shorter ones cannot be (fully) understood apart from their context. Bracketed numbers indicate the pages of the transcript. Asterisks indicate omitted matter, not by IB.

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AFTERNOON SESSION, 20 MAY, SECOND PART

*Chairman Hugh Seton-Watson*<sup>2</sup>

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[67] **IB** I should like to make two brief statements on Professor Venturi’s remarks. One is about his observation about Herzen as the man who infected Russian populists with that sense of total commitment which is a hallmark of Russian populists. ‘Total commitment’ is a Russian invention. I am the last person to wish

<sup>1</sup> The starting-date is given as 19 May in the *Government and Opposition* article referred to in the next sentence. Perhaps a dinner was held on that day.

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Seton-Watson (School of Slavonic and East European Studies).

## TO DEFINE POPULISM

to diminish Herzen's importance, but it appears to me that he was not the person who communicated this particular element to them. The notion of individual liberty, of emancipation, of the need for individual independence as part of the general programme – that is his burden. Social commitment originated elsewhere.

Someone has said in his paper, quite correctly, that Russian populism was less a social and economic programme before the 1880s and 1890s, as (at the beginning) a search for salvation, one of the preferred routes being a Tolstoyan demand to integrate oneself with the life of the peasants, emphasis on the debt which was owed to the peasants, and about the need to repay that debt. This was a specific Russian motif which one does not often find among populists elsewhere. This was a particular species of the total insistence on total social commitment: this demand does not come primarily from Herzen at all; it comes rather more from Belinsky. He is the severely moral teacher who introduced the categorical imperative – the stern duty of total commitment, which forbids a man to divide himself into various types of activity. He is not allowed to say that as a political being he believes one thing, while as a husband or artist he believes something else. This demand is a falsification of one's integral nature.

This view may rest on a myth, or a total illusion, but this was the element which Belinsky injected into the scene, and the fact that he came from and spoke for the 'underprivileged', i.e. the poor, gave it a particular force. Herzen argued more against oppression: Belinsky – detachment and escapism.

The other point which I wish to make is something which we shall have to discuss willy-nilly tomorrow. This is a dangerous but unavoidable subject, namely, the relationship of nationalism to populism. Professor Venturi said that nationalism corrupts

## TO DEFINE POPULISM

populism. No doubt it does. Yet they began very close to each other. Nobody could say that Chernyshevsky was a nationalist, or that any of the Russian populists of the 1860s and 1870s took an interest in foreign peoples. They were victims of total national self-preoccupation, which is again a Russian phenomenon. Unlike earlier and later scientists they thought entirely about their own Russian past, present and future, and saw themselves as a unique problem. Hence their notion of Russia alone as capable of avoiding capitalism, which stems partly from this national self-absorption.

I do not wish to enlarge on the historical basis of the connection between nationalism and populism, but it seems to me to have been born somewhere in the 1760s or 1770s in Germany and to be a response to some kind of national humiliation in Germany; then as in Russia later, populism stresses the 'internal' values of the chosen group as against the 'external' values of the enlightened cosmopolitanism of the philosophers of the eighteenth century. The Germans, like the Russians, tried hard not to be nationalists, but the *Volk* with which both began pervades the ideas of both. Hence this nexus is something which we shall have to touch upon.

[68] In the case of other populisms – for example, American populism – there is an even stronger nationalist element, which it is difficult to leave out. There is a xenophobia of a specific kind which is, on the whole, absent from Russian populism except for certain isolated movements in the 1860s and 1870s among the peasants and the half-populists who agitated among the peasants for the sole purpose of increasing general discontent and inciting to revolution.

If one asked what the early populists contemplated in the way of a regime after the overturn, there would, I think, be silence. In Chernyshevsky you get exceedingly unclear notions about partly local, partly centralised economic control, but if you asked what

## TO DEFINE POPULISM

they thought would happen after the Tsarist regime had been destroyed, they would merely have said that the people would rise and justice would reign. More than this I have failed to find.

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**IB** I may have given the impression that Belinsky was a populist. If I did, I was at fault. He was not. Towards the end of his life, he believed in State-controlled or simple capitalist industrialisation, or something like it. The identification of the 'integral' personality with the peasant does not belong to him. He did not romanticise the common man: still less the peasants whom he knew too well.

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AFTERNOON SESSION, 21 MAY

*Chairman IB*

[109] **IB** Before we attempt to alter the vocabulary of politics, which I think is our official task, it might be better if those who have remarks to make of a general kind – i.e., of a substantial and not formal kind, not about models and definitions – and who were not able to speak this morning, were given a quarter of an hour to make their points.

[*J. Allcock and Leonard Schapiro speak.*]

[114] **IB** Now we must address ourselves to the biting of the sour apple, a difficult part of our proceedings, which is the attempt to formulate some kind of model or definition or formula into which we can fit all the various types and nuances of populism which have been discussed; or, if we think that we cannot do it, to give reasons for our failure to do so, which might be equally fruitful. Perhaps we might decide upon one or two models, or three or four models. At the moment, I should like to conceal my

## TO DEFINE POPULISM

own opinion about either the desirability or possibility of this, which I hope to be able to formulate later.

Until 4.45 we had better simply have general discussion of the subject, started off by Mr Ionescu, who will make a report on the lines on which we should proceed. After that, people can speak for a maximum of four or five minutes each, but with a right of speaking more than once.

*[Ghita Ionescu speaks.]*

[115] **IB** That gives us ground for discussion. What I propose as a method of discussion is that people should speak freely now – a ‘free for all’, I think, is the term; a very populist slogan – until 4.45, and after refreshment we will try to generate something. The meeting is now open for discussion.

*[Maurice Cranston suggests a Wittgensteinian family-resemblance model of populism.]*

[116] **IB** May I ask a question about this, to me very sympathetic idea. If you press it very hard, if you say that A is like B, B is like C and C is like D, but A is not like D, anything can be made to resemble anything. In the end, all political movements can be arranged on that kind of slide and we shall not get any nearer. That is the only objection I have. Therefore, would you not say that if we are to employ this method, one should try to formulate something which all these things resemble to some appreciable degree?

*[Maurice Cranston agrees, oddly.]*

**IB** Rather than have a complete interchange.

## TO DEFINE POPULISM

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[135] **IB** The hour for refreshment has come. According to my observations, twelve of the speakers say that it is possible to obtain some kind of, if not definition, at least useful concatenation of criteria for the purpose of defining populism. Three suppose this to be on the whole not possible and, indeed, undesirable. Mr Macfarlane, I think is betwixt and between.

[*Tea-break*]

[136] **IB** Now we proceed with the task of producing or attempting to produce a model or models which we can regard as useful in identifying populism, either populism everywhere at all times and in all places or populism in specific circumstances of the nineteenth century or the twentieth century, populism in America, in Latin America, in Asia, in Africa, in the Balkans and so on. May I ask for suggestions as to how this should be done?

[*Alain Touraine obliges.*]

[139] **IB** We really have a contrast between, on the one hand, an attempt to produce some kind of so-called analytical model or models of populism without necessarily bringing in questions of specific developments of specific kinds and at specific places. On the other hand, there is the problem of historical change, which does stress the specific nature of the development of populism in particular countries and places and times, in order not to blur or eliminate the characteristics of specific populisms in the interests of some kind of artificial unification.

I think we are all probably agreed that a single formula to cover all populisms everywhere will not be very helpful. The more embracing the formula, the less descriptive. The more richly descriptive the formula, the more it will exclude. The

## TO DEFINE POPULISM

greater the intension, the smaller the extension. The greater the connotation, the smaller the denotation. This appears to me to be an almost a priori truth in historical writing.

These platitudes having been laid down, there is one other point which occurred to me – I am in sympathy with Professor Andreski<sup>3</sup> – that we must not suffer from a Cinderella complex, by which I mean the following: that there exists a shoe – the word ‘populism’ – for which somewhere there must exist a foot. There are all kinds of feet which it *nearly* fits, but we must not be trapped by these nearly-fitting feet. The prince is always wandering about with the shoe; and somewhere, we feel sure, there awaits it a limb called pure populism. This is the nucleus of populism, its essence. All other populisms are derivations of it, deviations from it and variants of it, but somewhere there lurks true, perfect populism, which may have lasted only six months, or [occurred] in only one place. That is the idea of Platonic populism, all the others being dilutions of it or perversions of it. I do not think that this approach would be very useful, but this is what all persons pursue who think that words have fixed meanings, particularly in historical and sociological subjects. I do not know whether anyone here does so. We must not, I suggest, be tempted in that direction.

At the same time, we must not be tempted in the other direction, which some have taken, to suppose that the word ‘populism’ is simply a homonym; that there are movements in America, in Russia, in the Balkans and in Africa, that they are all called populism owing to confusions in human heads, but that they have too little in common; their differences are far greater than their similarities; and that therefore nothing but confusion can be sown by using these general descriptions, and we must try to fit seven, eight or nine perfectly precise terms to all these

<sup>3</sup> S. L. Andreski (Reading).

## TO DEFINE POPULISM

different things, which have little in common, and this may clarify thought.

Yet I also have a feeling that whenever a word is much used, even if it is an exceedingly confusing or over-rich word, like ‘romanticism’, ‘idealism’, ‘populism’, ‘democracy’ and so on, something real is intended, something, not quite nothing. There is a sense in which one should look for the common core.

I think that the most helpful contributions containing lists of attributes are those of Dr Walicki<sup>4</sup> and Professor MacRae.<sup>5</sup> The former produced four criteria and the latter, as far as I could count, produced fifteen. These are not entirely feasible. Still they are pointers.

[140] I should have done some homework during the tea interval to try to tie these things into bouquets or clusters to produce something smaller out of them. I do not know that I can do very much, but let me try the following on this assembly and after that debate can break out again. Supposing we say that what is common to all populism everywhere – this cannot be true, but we will try it on – is a vague notion, and a vague name for it, which is intelligible to everybody here, the notion of *Gemeinschaft* – that is, that famous integral society which everybody talks about, some kind of coherent (all these words are capable of being shot down in the same way as ‘populism’) – some sort of coherent, integrated society, which is sometimes called *Volk*, which has roots in the past, either imaginary or real, which is bound by a sense of fraternity and by a desire for a certain kind of social equality and perhaps liberty – but of the two equality is probably nearer its heart than liberty – and which is opposed to competitive, atomised society, although in the American case it

<sup>4</sup> Andrzej Walicki (b. 1930), then (1964–8) reader, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw; Visiting Fellow, All Souls, 1966–7.

<sup>5</sup> Donald Gunn MacRae (1921–97), Professor of Sociology, LSE, 1961–78.

## TO DEFINE POPULISM

obviously believes in limited competition which is regulated in some so-called 'natural' fashion as against all kinds of 'unnatural' distortions of it.

It is broadly speaking apolitical: that is to say, it is not principally interested in political institutions, although it is prepared to use the State as an instrument for the purpose of producing its ends. But a State organisation is not its aim and the State is not its ideal human association. It believes in society rather than in the State. The State is an instrument, as Professor MacRae said. Moreover all these movements believe in some kind of moral regeneration. I am sure that that is common to them all.

In some sense they are dedicated to producing spontaneous, natural men who have in some way at some time become perverted by something. There must have been a spiritual fall somewhere. Either the fall is in the past or it is threatening – one of the two. Either innocence has been lost and some kind of perversion of men's nature has occurred, or enemies are breeding within or attacking from without. Who the enemies are, we do not need to classify. That will depend upon the specific situation.

The enemy may be capitalism, it may be foreign States which have forms of political, social or economic organisation which threaten the spontaneous integral group and the sense of brotherhood which unites them. It still unites them, or once untied them, so that one can now resurrect the unity from the past.

Populism certainly does not believe, so far as negative propositions are concerned, in the uniqueness of historical stages in the sense in which, say, most historicists believe that nothing from the past can ever be rescued: that what happened once has happened once and for all, and, therefore, that there is no way of looking back to the past to try to salve its values. It may believe in the translation of these ancient values into contemporary terms, but it believes these values to be rooted somewhere in the past:

## TO DEFINE POPULISM

they cannot be brand new. I do not think I know of any populism which assumes that man was born in a low or undesirable state and that the golden age is somewhere in the future, a novel situation which has never given any evidence of existence in the past. Some degree of past-directedness is essential to all populisms.

[141] I am trying to think what else is common to them, because these characteristics seem to me to be common to the American and the Russian types – the principal varieties. I cannot speak – I know too little about Africa and Latin America. It seems to me to be one of the roots of American populism – I speak in ignorance and I am sure Professor Hofstadter<sup>6</sup> will put me right – it is one of the causes, for example, of the indignation, say, in the relatively undeveloped Middle West, against all kinds of phenomena which its spokesmen regard as hostile – the excessive civilisation of the East Coast, its centralised capitalism, Wall Street, the cross of gold, frivolous, polite, smooth forms of insincere behaviour on the part of Harvard or Yale university professors, or smooth members of the State Department, contrasted with the free, spontaneous, natural behaviour of uncorrupted men, cracker-barrel philosophers in the village drugstore, from whom simple wisdom flows, uncorrupted by the sophistication of the Eastern cities, the result of some kind of degeneration of a political or of some other kind. This is common to all the populisms: that is, the central belief in an ideal, unbroken man, either in the present or in the past, and that towards this ideal men naturally tend, when no one oppresses them or deceives them.

Professor MacRae talked about personalism. Localism, I think, is part of the phenomenon, but it is not an absolutely essential one. I do not think we need put that in now.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Hofstadter (Columbia).

## TO DEFINE POPULISM

Having established very tentatively something as common to all these various forms of populism, let me add this. One must again return to the notion of the people. Who the people are will probably vary from place to place. On the whole, they tend to be, as somebody said quite correctly – I think it was Professor Seton-Watson – those who have been left out. Professor MacRae said this too. They are the have-nots, in some sense. They are peasants in Russia, because they are the obvious majority of the deprived; but they might be any group of persons with whom you identify the true people, and you identify the true people with them because the ideology of populism itself springs from the discontented people who feel that they somehow represent the majority of the nation, which has been done down by some minority or other. Populism cannot be a consciously minority movement. Whether falsely or truly, it stands for the majority of man, the majority of men who have somehow been damaged.

By whom have they been damaged? They have been damaged by an elite, either economic, political or racial, some kind of secret or open enemy – capitalism, Jews and the rest of it. Whoever the enemy is, foreign or native, ethnic or social, does not much matter.

One more thing can be said to be true of all populisms. That is that in some sense it would be just to say that it occurs in societies standing on the edge of modernisation – that is to say, threatened by it, or hoping for it; it does not matter which, but in either case uneasily aware of the fact that they cannot sit still; that they will have to take steps towards meeting either the challenge or the danger of modernisation, whether at home, on the part of classes or groups in their own country who are pushing towards it, or on the part of persons outside it, whose economic and social development is of such a kind as to threaten them if they do not in some way catch up or create some kind of walls with

## TO DEFINE POPULISM

which to resist them. This seems true of all the varieties of populism.

[142] Then we start with variations. For example – Dr Walicki can put me right on this – there is on the one hand the root of socialism and on the other hand the root of peasantism. These are alternative roots, and therefore alternative species of the same thing. Again, you could probably say that there are certain other varieties – for example, elitism. Some forms of populism believe in using elites for the purpose of a non-elitist society and some object to it on the ground that even using elitism as a means leads to elitism in the end.

The controversy among the Russian populists in that respect is fairly instructive. (I do not know whether there is an American parallel.) There was the famous controversy of Tkachev and Lavrov in the 1870s, for example. Tkachev was advocating, for purely practical reasons, dictatorship by a small elite of professional revolutionaries, since otherwise capitalism could not be destroyed in sufficient time. Lavrov's counter-argument was that this would defeat itself: once an elite gained power one would not get rid of it and this would, in fact, perpetuate a totalitarian State in the very effort to create an anti-totalitarian one, an elitist State in the effort to produce an egalitarian one.

Some populists believed in an elite, some did not; some believed in it except as an instrument, a means to the end, so that to a large extent it was a tactical difference and not a real one. Of course all these movements and ideologies wished to produce a fraternal, equal society and not a hierarchical or deferential one. Therefore they must be distinguished from other forms of what might be called romantic archaism or romantic nostalgia for a glorious golden past. There are dreams of a golden past in which men are anything but socially equal or self-governed.

The desire to return to the Middle Ages – of, let us say, Chesterton or Belloc – had something in common with the

## TO DEFINE POPULISM

craving for equality and fraternity, if only because they were anti-industrial, anti-individualistic, anti-capitalist. What they wanted to reproduce was a hierarchical order in which the king was on his throne, served by his nobles, over a pyramid of subjects each placed by God or by nature in the station most appropriate to them. This 'comparative' society, agrarian State, clerical, non-industrial, is a cohesive, neo-feudal *Gemeinschaft* but of course essentially unequal and deriving its beauty and unity and romantic attractiveness from its hierarchical or theocratic structure. All forms of populism are wholly opposed to this. You can say that these reactionary dreams and utopias have populist strains in them because they are anti-industrial and collectivist, but they do not qualify as populist because they do not stress the essential elements of populism – fraternity, freedom from imposed authority, above all equality. Liberty is not essential. Some populist movements demand it, some do not: it is inessential.

What else is at stake? One final thing that I should like to say is that I cannot tell how many of Professor MacRae's criteria this by now embraces. The opposition to centralised economic planning comes in under hostility to elites of any kind.

[*Donald MacRea thinks it is twelve.*]

[143] **IB** Twelve is unexpectedly satisfactory. Twelve out of fifteen is very promising.

Now as to religion. Affiliation to a religion is, I think, a specific property of perhaps some streams of Russian populism – but populism obviously need not be religious. American populism has surely been tinged with Protestantism. But I daresay that if you found some bone-dry atheists to be members of a populist movement you would not exclude them on the ground that religious faith was at the heart of such an outlook, that it was

## TO DEFINE POPULISM

at the very least a secularised form of an essentially religious movement.

Then there is the apocalyptic dream and the hero: yes, all populisms, it seems to me, are voluntaristic and anti-necessitarian. They do not accept an inevitable pattern of history. They believe that it is possible by means of a spontaneous gathering of the will of the good to leap into the new society and create these new men. They all believe this. They do not believe in a historicist timetable. They do not believe in necessary stages of historical development, which causes this to grow from that, and that to grow inexorably from something else – a predictable ascent up a tremendous historical ladder, the rungs of which are unalterable, which makes it utopian or impossible to do certain things until the uniquely appropriate stage is duly and inevitably reached. This, after all, is one of the chief differences between every form of Russian populism and every form of Russian social democracy and Russian Marxism.

This was, after all, one of the fields on which the great battles were fought. It was to refute this determinism that Socialist Revolutionary followers exerted themselves – Herzen against the Western determinists of his time, Mikhailovsky against social Darwinism, Plekhanov and the Marxists, who looked on populism as utopian precisely because of this unhistorical standpoint. For the early Russian Marxists there was a rigid timetable, and unless we obeyed that, we would never get anywhere at all, even if, to some extent, the ends of the various socialist movements were not altogether different from one another.

There is one further point: false populisms. We need not spend too much time on this because I think that on this we have reached general agreement. False populism is the employment of populist ideas for ends other than those which the populists desired. That is to say, their employment by Bonapartists or

## TO DEFINE POPULISM

McCarthyites, or ‘the Friends of the Russian people’, or Fascists and so on. This is simply the mobilisation of certain popular sentiment – say hostility to capitalism or to foreigners or Jews, or hatred of economic organisation or of the market society, or of anything you like – for undemocratic ends. The mobilised feeling could be genuine. This pseudo-populism does not necessarily involve cynical employment of tactics of a ‘double-think’ kind. It is clear that some of the demagogues of this type – Poujadists, Greenshirts, social creditors and the like – did in fact sympathise with some populist sentiments, but employed them for the purpose of creating some kind of elitist or socially or racially unequal regime, which is totally incompatible with the fundamental, if not fraternity then, at any rate, the passionate egalitarianism, of the real populist movement. That is enough to distinguish, for example, Bonapartism or Greek tyrannies, which were in a certain sense also a revolt against the aristocracy, against traditionalism, against hierarchical and deferential systems, from populism proper. This probably applies equally to modern ‘tyranni’ like Nastetsov Nknmahoz [*sic*].

[144] Wherever the general will which these people profess to embody is ultimately embodied in the general himself, whether the general is a person or a group or a leader – wherever the general will is incarnated in this fashion, it is reasonable to suspect that a perversion of populism has occurred. That is why I think that the Black Pulez [*sic*] populism, Fascist populism, Poujadist populism, various kinds of clerical populisms, and so on may share genuine elements with populism. But their goals are fundamentally incompatible with those of Narodniks of any kind: and that is enough to distinguish them.

Perhaps I have not embraced all Dr Walicki’s criteria. I have, perhaps, assimilated too enthusiastically with the subject of our discussion. I have behaved in an excessively ‘spontaneous’ and ‘integralist’ a fashion, too precipitately, without calculation of the

## TO DEFINE POPULISM

results. Perhaps I should have said something about the intelligentsia. It is reasonable to say that, historically speaking, populism, like all ideologies, is created by ideologists. Ideologists are, on the whole, educated or half educated persons, and educated or half educated persons, particularly in Russia, tended to turn into an intelligentsia for certain historical reasons.

Dr Walicki is right in supposing that one of the motives of most populist movements is the desire on the part of the creators of populism itself to be re-integrated into the general mass of the people from which they have become divided by their education, by their social position or by their origins.

Therefore, all populisms – I offer this as a general proposition about populism – distinguish between the alienated good and the alienated bad: the alienated good are persons who have become alienated as a result of historical circumstances, but are in a state of contrition. That is to say, they are repentant, they wish to repay their debt to society and re-integrate themselves into the mass of the people. They wonder, like Chernyshevsky, whether they sufficiently express the will of the people, because they feel that they are not members of the people. They live at a distance from the masses and, therefore, they are always worried, honourably worried, about whether they are sufficiently penetrated by the spirit with which they wish to be at one.

This is the topic of the debate by Russian populists: do we 'go to the people' to tell them what to do, or to learn this from them? What right have we to tell the people what to want? The only person completely outside this is Tkachev, who expressed the greatest possible contempt for the masses and wished to save them against their will. One day, no doubt, the people will be wise and rational, but we must not listen to what the peasants – stupid, reactionary, dull – say today. This, however, was, before Lenin, a comparatively marginal case.

## TO DEFINE POPULISM

This kind of populist, who has a ferocious contempt for his clients, the kind of doctor who has profound contempt for the character of the patient whom he is going to cure by violent means which the patient will certainly resist, but which will have to be applied to him in some very coercive fashion, is on the whole ideologically nearer to an elitist, Fascist, Communist etc. ideology than he is to what might be called the central core of populism. But such theorists exist. They exist and they have to be accommodated somewhere on our map. For Lenin, Tkachev was a populist, and his authoritarianism is in part derived from that tradition.

[145] There is one specific populist attribute which may or may not be universal – of that I am not sure. It is the one which Dr Walicki rightly stresses. That is the advocacy of a social and economic programme for the single purpose of avoiding the horrors of industrialisation and capitalism. This is not a passion for integralism, nor the visionary new medievalism of William Morris; this has nothing to do with Morris-dancing, or arts and crafts or Gandhi's spinning wheel, or a return to the Middle Ages; it is simply a sober theory of how we are to avoid the horrors of what is happening in the Western world. This is the kind of populism which was professed by sober statisticians and economists, towards the end of the nineteenth century in Russia, who were not necessarily partisans of some kind of *Gemeinschaft*. This was a perfectly rational social doctrine, founded, or at least aspiring to rest, on a sober calculation and estimate of the facts: simply a social policy coexisting with other social policies, something which, I should have thought, was probably most prevalent in backward countries, as Russia was in the nineteenth century, or the Balkans – not therefore equally prevalent in the United States, and therefore representing a particular attribute of a particular populism at a particular time in a particular place. Beyond this I cannot go. I do not know whether all this

## TO DEFINE POPULISM

constitutes a workable model or not. I am afraid all I have done is to have spoken too long.

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[146] [*S. L. Andreski asks why IB's definition of populism should be preferred to others.*]

**IB** I am simply presenting a true image. That is my only reason! Does Professor Seton-Watson accept Mr Hall's definition about archaic sections of the people rather than something like the unfortunate or the oppressed?

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[*Hugh Seton-Watson argues that the contribution of religion is more important than IB had suggested. Populist ideology succeeds and replaces religious faith.*]

**IB** You could say the same about Marxism or any secular ideology in that sense.

[*Hugh Seton-Watson is inclined to agree.*]

**IB** But not about this one in particular.

[*Hugh Seton-Watson disagrees (it seems), explaining that in populism God is replaced by the people.*]

[147] **IB** Or class. All I would add is that there are two things which I would add to Mr Hall's definition. One would be that the enemies of the people have to be specified, whether it be capitalists, foreigners, ethnic minorities, majorities or whoever it might be. They have to be specified. The people is not everybody. The people is everybody of a certain kind, and there are certain people who have put themselves beyond the pale in some sort of way, whether by conspiring against the people or by preventing

## TO DEFINE POPULISM

the people from realising itself, or however it may be. The people must be specified. So must the enemy. The people is not the whole of society, however constituted.

The other thing is that there is a studied vagueness about means of political action. I do not think that populism as such indicates the specific way in which it is to act. Provided that the people act as a whole to bring about that in which they believe, the means are left in various stages of indefiniteness. The people is not committed to any form of political action, except that on the whole it is directed against any form of control by minorities, whether representatives of a parliamentary democracy, or members of other institutions which it allows because of its fear of elites, even democratic ones, as a permanent form of government.

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*[An unidentified speaker asks whether IB's definition excludes populisms that hold power, such as those in Africa.]*

**IB** I would suspect that it excludes the Africans, but I do not know enough about the facts.

*[The same unidentified speaker asks whether the meeting agrees.]*

**IB** I would suspect that the African States tend to identify the general will of the people with some particular section of it, which is the self-constituted privileged expounder of this [148] will, dispensing pretty well with the need for continuous consultation, which, I think, is at the base of real populist ideology. The real populist ideology is a kind of unbroken, continuous plebiscite, as long as it is needed. At a certain point it will no longer be needed because everybody will be on family terms with everyone else. The idea is of a hugely extended family in which you do not need constantly to consult its members

## TO DEFINE POPULISM

because, where relations are those of affection, there is a continuous general consensus, a pre-established harmony founded on sympathy, which guarantees virtual unanimity on all central issues. Rousseau occasionally spoke in this fashion. But he was pretty pessimistic about its emergence.

\*

[150] [*Ernest Gellner queries a definition which entails that a successful populist cannot be called a populist.*]

**IB** I would not say that by definition. I agree that there is something very queer, because what has been said is true and improvising for somebody else is true [sic: *text corrupt?*]. This obviously would not work. The idea is that logically it is perfectly viable. The obstacle to its realisation is the facts. There is nothing illogical or self-contradictory in the notion of a society which is bound by the kind of [151] affection which only religious sects have – which are bound by some kind of family relationship – hence the sociological problems. If you could have a regime of that sort, it would be a successful populist regime.

[*Ernest Gellner disagrees, and claims that populism is bound to use nebulous concepts.*]

**IB** I think that the populist press could give a list of sociological characteristics, sociologically characterising what they would regard as members of the people. They can do it.

\*

[156] **IB** I would like to add one historical footnote. There are certain philosophical propositions in populism. I wish to say something in connection with a point made by Professor Venturi earlier in a very illuminating way. I do not wish to stress the hallowed name of Rousseau again. The point is that the doctrine

## TO DEFINE POPULISM

begins in the eighteenth century. This is to answer to some extent something which Professor Gellner and Professor Schapiro said. There was a doctrine in the eighteenth century according to which there had existed such a creature as natural man. Natural man was done in by artificial man. I do not mean that someone did natural man in. Man did himself in. Natural man is struggling inside artificial man, trying to get out. This is what Diderot says.

Alternatively you can conceive the situation as one in which there are large numbers – a majority – of natural men who have at some time or other been done down by various minorities of artificial men. If you do not accept this proposition, and think that it is a fantasy, then the whole structure begins to collapse. Professor Venturi remarked that the notion of the populists – which is also to be found in writings of his and my friend, the late Professor Salvemini – is that there are fetters which bind men, certain fetters with which artificial man is strangling natural man. If you strike off these fetters, natural man asserts himself and there is no further problem. You have reset his life, so to speak, in a natural pattern. No guidance, still less force, is required by the liberated prisoner. To direct him then is to main him again: to substitute new yokes for old.

There is no point, then, in asking what the new organisation, the post-revolutionary establishment, should do in the name of democracy. Should there, for example, be consultation or plebiscites? All these questions fall away because they arise only in connection with the use of organised power; this is *eo ipso* a perversion of original uncorrupted human nature. This disaster has been brought about by some kind of terrible event: the Flood, original sin, the discovery of iron and agriculture, or whatever else it may be: there was a blissful natural state, then the Fall and the yearning for the original unity. This can be restored, possibly by violence.

## TO DEFINE POPULISM

If populists were asked who the people are, I think that they would produce a definite answer. They would say that the people is the majority of their society, natural men who have been robbed of their proper post in life; then try to point to groups of artificial, corrupt men as holding down large groups of natural men. If the victims are not the large majority, populism falls. The Calvinist notion that a vast collection of corrupt men has to be rescued by a small minority of good men seeking to tell them that the truth is the opposite of all populist faith. That is the metaphysics of populism, although I know well that modern psychology may deny every part of it.

\*

[158] [*L. J. Macfarlane makes a suggestion about the planned summary of the proceedings in the journal Government and Opposition.*]

IB I do not think that a breathless world is expecting a communiqué from this assembly. I do not think that we need formulate our proposition in too precise a form.

Does anyone else wish to say anything ideologically? ... If not, I arrogate to myself the role of charismatic leader. My whole idea of populism I have learned in this assembly. Not for one moment would I claim to be expressing the views of anyone else or wish to be anti-populist in sentiment. But I would like to call on Professor Gellner to say a few words.

[*Ernest Gellner obliges.*]

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