Taking Politics to the People: Populism as the Ideology of Democracy

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Introduction

Our government has lost touch with the people. (Ross Perot in Westlind 1996, 175)

The parties and governments in most countries in Europe are isolated from their people. (Jörg Haider 1995, 88)

What are democratic processes but the people? (George Wallace in Lipset and Raab 1971, 355)

Although populist movements are usually sparked off by specific social and economic problems, their common feature is a political appeal to the people, and a claim to legitimacy that rests on the democratic ideology of popular sovereignty and majority rule. Analyses of populism often point to the tension within western democracy between this populist tradition and liberal constitutionalism. Certainly, there are difficulties in reconciling the project of giving power to the people with the drive to restrain power within constitutional limits, but concentration on this particular problem leaves unexplained the enduring strength of populist-democratic ideology and the ways in which it sustains populist movements. In this chapter I will argue that in order to understand populism we need to be aware of a complex and elusive paradox that lies at the heart of modern democracy. Crudely stated, the paradox is that democratic politics does not and cannot make sense to most of the people it aims to empower. The most inclusive and accessible form of politics ever achieved is also the most opaque. Precisely because it is the most inclusive form of politics, democracy needs the transparency that ideology can supply, and yet
the ideology that should communicate politics to the people cannot avoid being systematically misleading.

This democratic paradox may be summed up as a contradiction between *bringing the people into politics*, that is, providing avenues and mechanisms to allow their concerns to be fed into the political process, and *taking politics to the people*, by allowing them to form an intelligible and persuasive mental picture of it. To simplify the issue, we contrast democracy with personal dictatorship. Under autocratic rule the mass of the people are completely excluded from power. Nevertheless they can form a mental picture of where power lies, so that the system that leaves them powerless is at least intelligible. Democracy, by contrast, is about widening the political arena to include the entire population. But the more successful the project of inclusion, the more crowded and dynamic the political arena, and the more interests and opinions exert some small influence on policies, the harder it is for any particular voter to form a picture of the location of power or to trace a clear path through the maze.

Ideology, which reduces the complexity of politics to dogmatic simplicity, is ill-fitted to deal with these intricacies, and yet it is indispensable in mass politics. As democracy becomes more inclusive, the need for a simple and vivid ideological map of the political maze becomes even more pressing. But the ideology of democracy, continually reaffirmed by politicians and the mass media, is full of populist themes that belie the current trend of democratic politics, stressing sovereignty and the exercise of the general will against compromise and accommodation, popular unity against multiplicity, majority against minorities, and directness and transparency against complex and intricate procedures. The paradox, in other words, is that while democracy, with its claims of inclusiveness, needs to be comprehensible to the masses, the ideology that seeks to bridge the gap between people and politics misrepresents (and cannot avoid misrepresenting) the way that democratic politics necessarily works. This contradiction between ideology and practice is a standing invitation to populists to raise the cry of democracy betrayed, and to mobilise the discontented behind the banner of restoring politics to the people.

In this chapter I will explore the democratic paradox through an analysis of the workings of populist democratic ideology. The first section elaborates the fundamental problem of how to *take politics to the people*, in the sense of presenting an intelligible mental picture, whilst simultaneously *bringing the people into politics*, and thereby generating an unavoidably opaque political system. The core of the analy-