Populism without Popularity

Nina Power

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The culture of the recent deposed, but all-too-undead New Labour project may be summed up in a single phrase: 'Populism without popularity.' What does this mean? It means that the simulacrum of politics has overtaken any possibility of genuine social content, that the desire to be seen to be doing something to be approved of is greater than the desire to actually do it. Politics may well have been like this for some time, we should say, but something subtle has shifted in the transition from Thatcher to Blair, at least in the UK: the USA has long been entranced by presidents who are equally at home on the big screen as on the rallying stage (as Gil Scott Heron put it in *B Movie*: 'Acted like an actor . . . Hollyweird. Acted like a liberal. Acted like General Franco when he acted like governor of California, then he acted like a Republican. Then he acted like somebody was going to vote for him for president. And now we act like 26% of the registered voters is actually a mandate. We're all actors in this I suppose.').

We all know about spin, about style over substance, about how the media frames the debate, where one public 'slip' can cost an election, but what about the dire contradictions unleashed by the desperate attempt to appear popular without the will to enact potentially unpopular decisions? In Adam Curtis's *Century of the Self* (2002), in an episode entitled 'Eight People Sipping Wine in Kettering', a line describing New Labour focus groups, Derek Draper, a former Labour spin doctor, makes a valid point about the incoherency of the 'research' generated by such groups. Of course people are going to say that they both want better public services *and* to pay less tax! But is there anything more New Labour than asking people to map out their contradictory desires and then somehow *pretending to be able to act* on them? The sheen of populism gives everyone a good feeling: my voice has been heard on the one side, we're listening on the other. The miasmic fantasy of 'Cool Britannia' that saw pop stars mingle with politicians in a weightless bubble of faddish fashion and creative industry speak, was pop music and the art world revealing their desperate desire to seem appealing without necessarily arousing any passion (it was about this time that pop stars were suddenly allowed to be just nice normal boys and girls and no one was supposed to worry about class any more).

Recent years have seen the arrival of flash mobs – distracted spectacles of apolitical 'communities' incredibly quickly co-opted by ad campaigns and 'spontaneous' fake demands to bring back old products (chocolate bars, crisps) that people dimly remembered from their childhoods. These ironic displays nevertheless hint at a subterranean desire for both spontaneity and a more genuine sense of belonging: popularity without the need for populism. In the twentieth century, the right-wing, or, more broadly reactionary, tendencies of political and social life have historically been much better at attempting to inculcate a 'true' populism (mass rallies, mass use of propaganda cinema, etcetera), although the Soviets were the first to see the potential of reproducible poster art and an international cinema (albeit in one country). Today, in the USA we see the rise of the 'Tea Party Movement', which seems to want to directly fuse a horror of taxation with a kind of deep psychological resentment, and in the UK the rise of the English Defence League, a single issue 'popular' movement that objects to 'extremist Islam' and looks and acts uncannily like the racist mobs Ballard depicted in his final novel *Kingdom Come*. Trapped between a commodity culture obsessed with creating fake-popular campaigns, and Facebook-organizing racist thugs, the future of populism doesn't look

great: against this depressing populism, our own recourse is to reclaim the notion of popularity when and where it emerges.

But how can we separate true popularity from false? Is anything allowed to be genuinely popular without immediate recapture by media and consumer culture? A hint here would be to observe when and where the numbers game is fixed, when precisely people don't want you knowing how many people are involved. Every protestor and activist knows that when the police give out their figures for protests it's usually a quarter to a half of the real numbers; the same goes for media coverage – the crowd was barely there! Even in the arena of the basely numerical (that is, all contemporary human life), we can see the cracks in the edifice of populism against popularity. These moments of genuine popularity may be overwhelmingly motivated by anger and injustice, but perhaps this is as good a starting point as any, and perhaps the only one we have available to us in our current predicament.

Nina Power is a senior lecturer in philosophy at Roehampton University and the author of *One-Dimensional Woman* (2009).

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