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Populism and the politics of redemption

Filipe Carreira da Silva
Institute of Social Sciences University of Lisbon, Portugal
Selwyn College, Cambridge University, UK

Mónica Brito Vieira
University of York, UK

Abstract
This article re-examines current definitions of populism, which portray it as either a powerful corrective *to* or the nemesis *of* liberal democracy. It does so by exploring a crucial but often neglected dimension of populism: its redemptive character. Populism is here understood to function according to the logic of resentment, which involves both socio-political indignation at injustice and envy or *ressentiment*. Populism promises redemption through regaining possession: of a lower status, a wounded identity, a diminished or lost control. Highly moralized images of the past – historical or archetypal – are mobilized by populist leaders to castigate the present and accelerate the urgency of change in it. The argument is illustrated with *Caesar's Column*, a futuristic novel written by the Minnesota populist leader Ignatius Donnelly. The complex and ambivalent structure of this dystopian novel – a textual source for the Populist Party manifesto in the 1890s, which stands in contrast with agrarian populism as everyday utopia – enables us to move beyond the polarized positions dominating the current debate. Reading *Caesar's Column* ultimately shows that populism can be both a corrective and a danger to democracy, but not for the reasons usually stated in the literature.

Keywords
populism, democracy, redemptive politics, resentment

Corresponding author:
Filipe Carreira da Silva, Selwyn College, Cambridge University, Cambridge, UK.
Email: fcs23@cam.ac.uk

Introduction

Populism, both as a political phenomenon and a political term, is an American creation. The American Populism of the 1890s refers to a political experiment that began as a social protest movement arising from the Farmers' Alliance in about 1890. The movement became institutionalized in several southern and western states in the course of that decade as the Populist (or the People's) Party, and reached the zenith of its significance with the presidential campaign of 1896 of populist nominee William Jennings Bryan, whose defeat against the Republican candidate William McKinley rapidly led to its dissolution as an independent political movement. Populism, upper case, soon became populism, lower case – a chameleonic creature that spread across the world, often independently from its US origins.

The 20th century witnessed countless manifestations of this political phenomenon. Between the 1940s and 1960s, the populist epicentre was in Latin America. Since the late 1980s, 'neo-populism' has been employed to characterize, first, the leftist politics of Latin American leaders such as Hugo Chávez or Evo Morales, and then a plethora of right-wing movements in Western and Eastern Europe. The aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis also brought with it one of its most vigorous re-emergences, both at the right and left of the ideological spectrum, in consolidated Western democracies and elsewhere.

This article takes this recent re-emergence of the phenomenon as its starting point. It sets itself two tasks. One is of conceptual clarification. The current proliferation in media, political, and scholarly discourses of terms such as 'populist' or 'populism' has done little to clarify what they connote, and how exactly they relate to other concepts, namely democracy. The other, related goal is to expand our understanding of populism by exploring one of its constitutive dimensions: the politics of (populist) redemption. Generally speaking, redemptive politics refers to the promise of a future better world. In contrast, the politics of scepticism is fundamentally pragmatic: it has much lower expectations of what government can achieve and is suspicious of both power and enthusiasm. The assumption of redemptive politics is that social reform and political change are eminently within the realm of governmental action. Politics is thus a matter of bringing perfection or salvation to this world (Canovan, 1999: 8; Oakeshott, 1996: 21–38). That populism has a redemptive dimension has been noted before. Indeed, one of the earliest and more trenchant criticisms levelled at American Populism focused precisely on its redemptive character (Hofstadter, 1955). Yet the exact nature of the relationship between populism and the politics of redemption remains elusive.

Redemptive politics has two dimensions. On the one hand, it has a *temporal* dimension: It is decidedly future-oriented but it involves a reference to *a* past – historical or archetypal – and to present experience. As Emirbayer and Mische point out, the 'projective' dimension of human agency involves 'a first step toward reflectivity, as the response of a desirous imagination to problems that cannot satisfactorily be resolved by the taken-for-granted habits of thought and action that characterize the background structure of the social world' (1998: 984). This orientation towards the future means that redemptive politics is often analysed as a form of utopianism (Thaler, 2018). In turn, depending on how the future is imagined, utopianism can take two basic forms

(Abensour, 2008; Jacoby, 2005; Levitas, 2007; Geuss, 2017). One type is programmatic utopianism. Here the redemptive promise of a better world includes a more or less detailed description of how to get there and what that future holds for us. The other form is open-ended utopianism. In this case, the emphasis is on using a vision of a more perfect future in order to criticize the present – rather than on offering a blueprint of the future, which is left undefined. On the other hand, redemptive politics has a *moral* dimension. The ways past, present and future are depicted are highly idealized. In particular, redemptive politics operates with a conception of Messianic time insofar it points to a better, idealized vision of the future. This is also the case with populist redemptive politics, whose distinctive temporal-moral structure is present in all the historical manifestations of this phenomenon, from the American Populists of the 1890s to the present day.

In this article, we develop our argument as follows. In Section 1, we review the existing literature on the relationship between populism and redemption. We identify two basic positions: one that uses this relationship to stress the democratic potential of populism, and another that uses it as proof that populism is a danger to democracy. There are problems with both positions, however, which we address by advancing a new understanding of populism. By proposing a new definition of populism (Section 2), which includes a distinctive redemptive dimension (Section 3), that we illustrate with the case of the populist utopian novel *Caesar's Column* (Section 4), we bring new light to both of these dimensions. Temporally, *Caesar's Column* presents us with an instance of populist redemptive politics that cuts across the distinction between programmatic and open-ended utopianism. This raises important questions not only with respect to the nature of redemptive/utopian political projects but regarding the character of populism itself. Morally, re-examining the temporal-moral structure of populism promises to help us enlarge our understanding of the ways in which it is related to democracy. *Caesar's Column*'s plot contains the two basic forms of utopianism: as a critique of the present and as a blueprint of a future perfect society. This mirrors the equivalent ambivalence of redemptive populist politics as social text, which ultimately explains its equally ambivalent relationship with democracy.

I Populism and redemption in earlier scholarship

The analysis of populism as a specific type of 'politics of faith' has been the subject of much discussion at least since the publication of John D. Hicks' study, *The Populist Revolt* (1931). A professor in American history, Hicks is the first of a long line of commentators to use the redemptive character of populism to stress its democratic credentials. Populism's promise of a future better world emerges in Hicks' writings as a political answer to the agrarian economic difficulties of the Reconstruction Era, and specifically as a frontier phenomenon as the hard times were particularly dire in the newly settled area. Like Hicks, C. Vann Woodward, both in *Tom Watson* (1938) and in *Origins of the New South* (1951), sees the populists as major sources for 20th-century liberalism, manifested in the Progressive movement and the New Deal. Subsequently, Morison and Commager, in *The Growth of the American Republic* (1953: 236–41),

reiterate this assessment and depict populism as a radical democratic political response to an authoritarian government that had grown increasingly hostile to agrarian interests.

This benevolent and approving reading of American Populism continued in the 1960s. American historian Norman Pollack describes the grass-roots world of Midwestern Populism in *The Populist Response to Industrial America* (1962). Here, the redemptive quality of populism emerges organically as a kind of 'folk-wisdom' that enabled populists to formulate an extraordinarily penetrating critique of industrial society. A progressive social force, Midwestern Populism involved a perfectionist conception of human self-fulfilment. The goal of populism, Pollack explains, 'was "the hope of realizing and incarnating in the lives of the common people the fullness of the divinity of humanity"' (1962: 13).

In the following year, Walter Nugent published *The Tolerant Populists*, a still unsurpassed historical study of populism in Kansas, the heartland of Great Plains Populism. Taking recourse to thousands of textual sources, namely populist leaders' speeches and editorials, Nugent carefully reconstructs the populists' promise of a better future. This comes in the form of a vision of America as the promised land of abundance, equal opportunity and equitable distribution of wealth. In populist rhetoric, the United States is a community of destiny, which not only embodies democratic republicanism, where the people rule, but also true economic democracy. Implied in this rhetoric is the unnatural division between 'us, the people', who created wealth, and 'them', those who manipulated wealth already produced. This idealized but betrayed America, which draws inspiration and legitimation in the American Revolution, provides populists with a concrete basis to undertake a social critique of the present, which is reinforced by the projection of a powerful redemptive image of the future (Nugent, 1963: 178–80).

In 1969, in a collection that arguably inaugurated the modern theoretical populist literature, British sociologist Peter Worsley continues this strand with a crucial innovation. Like his American colleagues before him, Worsley questions the reduction of democracy to the institutionalization of opposition and to the periodic change of government, and emphasizes empowered inclusion, or 'the involvement of the people in governing their own lives' (1969: 246). Yet Worsley moves beyond them in his conceptualization of populism – which ceases to be an ontic category, with a certain substantive content (ideology, rhetoric, etc.), to become a logic or way of organizing contents: an 'emphasis' in the political culture of a given community. This emphasis is neither democratic nor anti-democratic in itself: although authoritarian movements can indeed claim to represent the people and appeal to direct forms of participation, so too do egalitarian and reform movements. Populism, Worsley concludes, is perfectly compatible with democracy.

These two moves by Worsley, his emphasis on participation and his rejection of an ontic understanding of populism, mark a watershed in the literature on populism. Three of the most significant recent attempts at extracting the democratic potential of populism out of its redemptive dimension have all taken their lead from Worsley's 1969 essay. One of the most influential is Ernesto Laclau's neo-Gramscian theory of hegemony, whose development begins in the late 1970s and culminates with *On Populist Reason* in 2005. For Laclau, the inherent capacity of populism to include new social groups in the democratic process goes hand-in-hand with its utopian character (2005: 167). In fact,

Laclau's writings on populism can be read as an attempt to reconstruct socialism as a populist utopia. At the heart of Laclau's populist utopia is the concept of 'the people'; this is because, as Laclau forcefully puts it, 'the political operation *par excellence* is always going to be the construction of "a people"' (2005: 153). It is an empty, or (as in the full-fledged version of the theory) floating, signifier, suggesting that 'the people' is a kind of alternative empty horizon that can take different shapes and be interpreted in different ways. These different interpretations are brought together around a shared imaginary, which remains empty and without definite content. It is a kind of 'enacted utopia', which can be seen in demonstrations, street protests and other forms of direct action (Sargisson, 2014).

A second important contribution is that by Benjamin Arditi (2007), who claims that while populism can be a potentially dangerous underside of democracy, it can also function as a redemptive force or democratic promise within the democratic system. A third significant voice in this conversation is that of Margaret Canovan (1999), who explicitly describes populism as a 'redemptive style of politics', which provides an alternative to the dry pragmatism of representative democracy. This 'politics of faith' emerges as populism exploits the gap between promise and performance in democracy, as in the case of the original American Populism of the 1890s (1999: 12), and in numerous times of crisis ever since. However diverse in its disciplinary affiliations and epistemological assumptions (see also e.g. Hayward, 1996), this strand of populist literature nevertheless converges in one central point: the assertion that populism is a type of redemptive politics helps explain its compatibility with democracy, insofar as democracy is not enclosed in its liberal format.

For others, however, the redemptive nature of populism betrays its anti-democratic nature. One of the earliest examples of this position is found in American historian Richard Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform* (1955). Hofstadter breaks with Hicks's approving reading of the populists in two fundamental regards. First, with his periodization, which was typical of the progressive historiography that traced a continuous path of reform from the 1890s through the 1930s. According to Hofstadter's own periodization, the New Deal (1930s) marks a sharp, pragmatic departure from the redemptive, ideologically-driven populists (1890s) and progressives (1900–14). Implicit in this new periodization is Hofstadter's second crucial break with Hicks: a novel understanding of the character of populist redemptive politics. Fundamentally retrogressive, the populists' nostalgia for an agrarian past – the 'agrarian myth', a view that glamorized farming, country life and the self-sufficient yeoman, and saw this pastoral past as conducive to moral and civic virtue – is mobilized to explain their fears of modernity and no small amount of bigotry, a 'complex of fear and suspicion of the stranger that haunted, and tragically still haunts, the nativist American mind' (1955: 82). This comes illustrated by a variety of politicians who combined the demand for reforms with strong moral convictions 'and the choice of hatred as a moral creed', from Tom Watson to Huey Long (Hofstadter, 1955: 21). Hofstadter is among the first American historians to make use of social scientific concepts and explanations to account for the populists' redemptive politics. Although Hofstadter was ready to concede that the populists were anything but oblivious regarding their material conditions, the key explanatory factor of progressive historiography, he places loss of social status at the core of his argument.

Hofstadter's focus on attitudes signals the growing influence of behavioural science among historians in the 1950s. In fact, Hofstadter's use of social-scientific concepts hints at a more general attempt by social scientists to reassess American Populism in a fundamentally negative light. Victor Ferkiss, a political scientist with a background in psychological warfare, went as far as associating the redemptive populist mind to American fascism: 'these populist beliefs and attitudes', Ferkiss writes, 'form the core of Pound's philosophy, just as they provide the basis of American fascism generally' (1955: 174). Yet, conceptually speaking, it was sociologists who took the lead in this negative reassessment of populism. Sociologists saw the populists' redemptive vision as a combination of irrationality and class resentment. In addition, unlike historians such as Hofstadter who used class resentment to emphasize the retrogressive character of this orientation (see also Lerner, 1957: 49), they claimed that this redemptive vision translated itself into future-oriented attitudes. Seymour Martin Lipset (1955) uses the peculiar social attitudes of the populists to explain why they bypassed the distinction between movements that occur during economic depressions (explained by real material losses) and protest movements that arise in periods of economic prosperity, motivated by seeking to improve or maintain their social status position. While clearly a Depression-based movement with roots in real abuses, the populists were also motivated by status resentment. For Lipset, this singularity can be traced back to the peculiar redemptive vision of the populists, in which bringing salvation to this world went hand-in-hand with irrational scapegoat-seeking (e.g. Jews) on which to heap their resentment.

On the other hand, Edward Shils in *The Torment of Secrecy* (1956) finds in the populists' redemptive mind-set one of the 'deeper sources' of 20th-century security-mindedness. Although rooted in the late 19th-century populists, this mentality of conspiracy-mindedness soon moved beyond the Midwest to be found 'in the National Socialist movement in Germany, in British fascism, in American populism and more broadly in Bolshevist and Fascist movements in all countries' (1956: 31). Furthermore, Talcott Parsons (1955) rejects to reducing the populist redemptive vision either to a matter of rational choice or to the blind impact of institutional factors. Rather, Parsons depicts it as an anti-elite and anti-East orientation, which results from the class resentment of downwardly mobile farmers. David Riesman and Nathan Glazer (1955), in turn, found in the redemptive rhetoric of the populists the distant origins of McCarthyism itself.

Many of these themes and preoccupations have been explored by scholars and political commentators (e.g. Blumenthal, 1987), and by subsequent opponents of populism who continue to find in its singular redemptive nature a serious threat to a constitutional conception of democracy, individual rights and the balancing of powers. An irrational excess of egalitarianism, populism bears the seeds of tyranny (Taguieff, 1995; Urbinati 1998). One of the most articulate recent expressions of this position is by Abts and Rummens (2007). Drawing upon Schmitt's theory of democracy, they suggest that populism projects a 'fictitious' (by which they mean false and dystopian) vision of the people as a homogeneous and sovereign political entity. This 'imaginary fiction of a closed, collective identity' would, according to this understanding, suppress the plurality and conflict that underpin and legitimize democracy, which stands here for the ideal of 'an open and diverse society' (2007: 415; see also Müller, 2016).

There are problems with both positions, however. The first position, by connoting populism with popular participation, does not provide the necessary conceptual means to analyse how and when populism becomes dangerous. Conversely, the second position fails to appreciate the potentially democratic nature of the redemptive dimension of populist politics. This is partly because, we believe, of a defective understanding of what populism is and how it functions. In the next section, we offer a possible solution to these problems.

II Populism as a logic of political action

Populism exists in a tense, fundamentally ambivalent relationship with democracy. We agree with the opponents of populism that resentment plays a crucial role in populist politics. We believe, however, that to reduce resentment to social attitudes, or any other ontic content such as discourse, rhetoric, etc., is fundamentally problematic. This is because ontic approaches tend to describe populism as accurately representing the 'natural divisions of the real world' (Wiles, 1969: 171), as if such divisions were definable independently of the deep structures of meaning associated with the very practice of definition. Since we believe they are not, i.e. that they are socially con-structed, our position stands epistemologically closer to that of some of the advocates of populism, namely those who argue that rather than focusing on the *contents* of populism we should focus on the *logic* according to which such contents are organized (e.g. Laclau, 2005). Yet the 'oppositional logic' identified by Laclau, which he derives from Carl Schmitt's critique of liberal democracy, does not seem adequate to account for populism for at least two reasons. First, enmity is not the true populist logic because populism involves some degree of identification between the parts. Enmity – in either Schmitt's *Volkish* rendition or in Laclau's post-structuralist version – does not. Second, Laclau's argument that the logic of populism is the logic of politics as such begs the question of what is, after all, specific about it.

In contrast to Laclau, we argue that populism is an outgrowth of democracy and its logic cannot be understood apart from democracy's fundamental commitment to the principle of equality. To put it more simply, populism results from a paradox at the heart of democracy. An impulse towards universal inclusion is inscribed in the democratic project. However, it so happens that exclusion is constitutive of inclusion. Exclusion is therefore unavoidable. With every attempt to broaden inclusion, new forms of exclusion emerge. No matter how hard democracy attempts to dissolve boundaries, new ones keep cropping up. Consider, for instance, how in a constitutional democracy rights have an inherent dynamic towards universal inclusion, but will very often remain reserved to citizens alone, and informally out of reach for even some of them. Exclusions affecting noncitizens, let alone those affecting citizens themselves, are especially unsettling in democracies because they contend with the understanding of democracy as an inclusive community, built upon perfectly symmetrical relationships, hinging on the recognition of universal freedom and equality. Being constitutive for inclusion, exclusion is inescap-able, but concrete exclusions are not necessarily so. Given their normative foundation on the principle of equality among persons and popular sovereignty (Morgan, 1989), democracies are the regime in which such exclusions become harder to negotiate and the

particular grounds for exclusion more contested. As a result, democracy is always haunted by a potential for disillusionment and disaffection (Gest, 2016). This is the seedbed of populism, which works according to a logic that involves both a comparative and a normative element, that of *resentment* (Demertzis, 2006; Ure, 2014; Engels, 2015).

This marks a significant departure from the behaviourist approaches discussed above, in which resentment refers to social attitudes that help explain populist politics. Our understanding, by contrast, is that resentment should be seen as a logic of social and political action. This better captures how populism works and its specific character. Logic is here not a formal system of inference, nor is it Laclau's 'special grammar governing each sphere of human activity' (Laclau, 1999: 102). Rather than claiming that the logic of resentment functions as an ontological feature of all politics (and therefore also of populism), we make the much narrower claim that, for all its redefinition in the changing context of history, populism has certain necessary features that are amenable to logical analysis. To be precise, we claim that populism is moved by a logic of resentment, operating within and mobilized by democracy's egalitarian commitments. This logic, even though it determines much of 'the objects which it is possible to constitute' and 'the relations that are possible between those objects' (Laclau, 1999: 102), does not determine them fully. Still, it gives us sufficient grounds to distinguish certain political processes as populist.

The logic of resentment, in an argument that can be traced back to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, governs certain emotions that concern the fortune of others. Three emotions are considered: indignation (*nemesis*), envy (*phthonos*), and emulation (*zêlos*), which together produce resentment (Aristotle, 2007: 154 ff.). The upshot of Aristotle's discussion is that the operation of the logic of resentment, under which the three emotions fall, supposes the two agents involved in it to be parties to the same game (see Geuss, 2016: 170 ff.). If this is obviously the case with emulation and indignation, where the parties are still construed as moral partners, Aristotle is clear that even in envy some sort of identification is required: we envy only those whom we perceive to be 'like us' in some respect (2007: 144). The issue at stake here is the perceived relative positions of the few and the many, whereby one part of the people perceive their situation as inferior or superior *relative* to the position of the other part of the people. This is why envy is different from hatred. We hate enemies, and feel not simply demoted but denied by them. But we envy only those who are sufficiently like us to be perceived as some kind of rivals or competitors. People/plebs and elite are competitors. Especially (but not exclusively) in right-wing populism, the elite is often accused of favouring a third group – e.g. immigrants, welfare recipients, ethnic minorities, typically presented as an out-group. But though their othering promotes their construction as enemies, some common framework is still being presupposed in which they are rivals, e.g. the internal job market. Unlike enmity, then, the rivalries of resentment presuppose a degree of identification.

Resentment will often concern the identification and protection of certain norms regulating our social and political relationships, notably, in the case of populism, the democratic principles of equality and popular sovereignty, and therefore it will be sensitive to the issue of the perceived fairness of the situation. We resent the (perceived) violation of norms of justice; we resent the harms committed and

suffered by us in result of this violation; and we resent those whom we deem responsible for the violation. However, the question of the deservingness (equity, fairness) of the situation in the subject's eyes poses itself differently according to the emotion in question. Indignation patterns social situations involving a general moral concern for justice: we feel indignant before the denial of moral entitlements or the breach of obligations that constitute our relationships with other agents. Present in the case of indignation, such an appeal to a shared normative framework seems to be absent in the case of envy. Envy of another's good fortune works not only regardless of the way they act or judge us, but it can also work regardless of any expectation of acquiring the good for oneself (it might suffice that others are deprived of it). This type of envy is very problematic politically. It can result in universalized injury or in a lowering of the prospects of everyone, including the envious themselves; for example, when lower-class citizens (seemingly para-doxically) oppose public policies from which they would arguably benefit, such as those promoting social and economic equality (Cramer, 2016). They might feel they are not getting their fair share, but the feeling that others are getting more than they deserve can become their primary, or even single, political driver.

We have mentioned deservingness here. In effect, Aristotle, at least implicitly, seems to think that even envy might not be entirely immune to questions of 'personal desert', i.e. to claims that are grounded in the value people themselves perceive to have (one's 'fair share'). He says people are particularly envious of things that they themselves 'desire or think they ought to have' (2007: 145). And they need not be wrong in their grievance or in their quest for redress. Imposing burdens on the most advantaged may be a necessary corrective for the incapacity of our democracies to correct for morally arbitrary distributions of power and wealth, especially where inequalities cease to be mutually advantageous, liberty is threatened, and fair equality of opportunity denied (Green, 2013). There is a difference, however, in the ways indignation and envy relate to norms. While a more general moral concern for justice underpins indignation, in envy our concern is a particular, personal concern for what we consider as our undeserved inferiority. Still, in both cases, resentment operates mainly in the present. Future expectations and memories of the past are not directly involved in its operation: typically, one does not envy a projection of our neighbour's future gains, or feel especially indignant with past grievances. Envy and indignation pattern social situations here and now.

But if envy might still imply a modicum of resentment, understood as a 'moral' emotion, resentment does not necessarily imply comparison. To explain, resentment can be sensitive to the normative question of the fairness of the subject's situation while ignoring the issue of the perceived relative positions of the subject and the object. We can therefore resent another/others for considering they unjustly and intentionally caused us injury, without comparing ourselves with them or considering them to benefit from undeserved good fortune.

With these distinctions between different forms of resentment in mind, we are now in a position to better understand how populism works. As a logic of social and political action, resentment patterns social and political relationships in one of two ways (or sub-logics): either as socio-political resentment, as reconstructed by Scottish moral sentiment

theory and which is motivated by moral indignation, or Nietzschean-like *ressentiment*, which results from envy. This means that the populist logic of resentment moves in the space between pure indignation and radical envy. It must simultaneously include certain elements: a *normative* element, i.e. a reference to democratic norms, notably democracy's superordinate commitment to equality and popular sovereignty, or the idea of the people as the ground of political legitimacy; a *comparative* element imbued with that normativity, i.e. a sense of undeserved inferiority; a *rivalry* between parts, where one part is deemed responsible or to blame for the underserved inferiority of the other in view of shared commitments; and a *redemptive* appeal to the restoration of democratic equality made for the part in the name of the whole – 'the people', hence the –ism, populism.

These four necessary and sufficient conditions for populism to exist enable us to distinguish between populist and non-populist cases with greater clarity than before. Consider the first condition, which refers to indignation at the violation of democratic norms and principles. This does not constitute on its own a basis for populism, as the example of white opposition to the apartheid regime in South Africa demonstrates. Even though they resented the violation of democratic norms of justice in their political community, their politics was not populist because they did not perceive themselves as consigned to an underserved position of inferiority by that violation (in effect, they were all too aware of being privileged by it). Or, consider the combination of the first two conditions, when indignation at the violation of democratic norms and principles is combined with a perceived inferior positioning brought about by their negation. Again, this does not per se lead to populism. Consider the case of the Black Lives Matter movement. This is not a populist movement, where the claims brought forward are of the part in the name of the whole ('the people'), but rather envisage primarily the recognition of the part by the other part in its difference. Finally, consider a case where the first three conditions are present. Let us think of Marxism. Although Marxism posits class struggle as the engine of history, both capitalists and workers are deemed victims of the same system: capitalism. As such, Marxism resents systemic inequalities, but in recognizing their structural nature it ultimately frees the agents from responsibility or blame. Its impetus is not moralizing.

This is not the case, however, with Latin American movements under the banner of 21st-century socialism. Their efforts at political mobilization rely often on resentment being directed at the attitudes and intentions of the alleged perpetrators of workers' suffering. Their action expresses not mere frustration or malaise but imputation of responsibility. The basis of their claims is not class but popular sovereignty (hence, they are made in the name of the 'people'). These claims are enthused with a sense of heightened urgency. They project a vision of future salvation from the unbearable misery of the here and now. This salvific image of the future partly draws its legitimation from a mythological view of the past, as in the iconic 'rebirth' of Simon Bolivar as a *mestizo*, the mirror image of the humble and virtuous Venezuelan *pueblo*. This combination of all four elements, including its redemptive appeal to the restoration of democracy's promises, places it firmly within populism.

III The 'politics of faith' and populism

Albeit constitutive of populism, redemptive politics is not specifically populist. Michael Oakeshott, who first contrasted the 'politics of faith' with the 'politics of scepticism' (1996: 21–38), went as far as suggesting that the dominant mood in modern politics involves the promise of a future better world, i.e. it is *redemptive*. The assumption is that salvation can be achieved through human effort. Oakeshott's sceptical treatment of the 'politics of faith' was, of course, but a specific instance of the wider liberal suspicion of perfectionism, the doctrine directing society to arrange institutions and to define the duties and obligations of individuals so as to achieve the most perfect life possible (Rawls, 1971: 325). Margaret Canovan (1999) uses Oakeshott's distinction in her analysis of populism. She sees redemptive politics as one of democracy's two faces. Populism is said to follow democracy 'like a shadow' as one of the 'radicalisms' that is liable to emerge whenever the gap between the 'redemptive' and the 'pragmatic' faces of democracy is wide enough (1999: 9). Canovan's argument, however, focuses on the redemptive face of democracy, not populism's. Furthermore, implicit in her analysis is the suggestion that populism is intrinsic – as a shadow is to the object that casts it – to democracy's redemptive face. Yet the image of populism following democracy like a shadow can be deceptive. Although it originates in democracy's central paradox and is normatively oriented towards it, populism has a much more ambiguous relationship with democracy than this metaphor suggests (see also Arditi, 2007). To see why, let us examine the populist 'politics of faith' in three successive steps: its temporal orientation, the kind of political mobilization it elicits, and its relationship with democracy.

   Arguably, there is little agreement in the populist literature regarding the temporal orientation of its redemptive dimension. Some of its critics have stressed its retrogressive character, while others emphasize the threat to liberal democracy that its progressive redemptive vision represents. Likewise, there are those who stress the potential for democratic renewal of populist images of salvation located in the past, while others prefer to stress how populist projections of future redemption are used to criticize present democratic institutions and beliefs. Once we take the perspective of the logic of resentment, however, populism's distinctive temporal-moral structure comes to the fore. This complex temporal structure does not give us regulative 'images' of the future. Rather, it uses an image of a historical or archetypal past – democracy as it was or as it ought to have been – so as to de-familiarize ourselves with the present, and restructure our experience in ways distinct from all other forms of defamiliarization.

   Populism mourns the loss of control but it is not retrogressive. It looks back at the original promise of democracy but, unlike nationalism or conservatism, it does not construe it in any elaborate form. It merely uses it as a normative yardstick to assess the present. Given the democratic paradox, the necessary result of this assessment is resentment. Resentment is not inherently constructive. At best, it can create conditions for the rupture through which construction may pass, but it cannot do the construction itself. At worst, it can also engender anger and disempowered victimization. It can then become strictly non-constructive, especially when it evolves into radical envy. Both in the case of envy and indignation, however, resentment is 'painful' (Geuss, 2017). We experience this pain in the present: our feelings of indignation and envy are experienced

as we compare ourselves to others, 'here and now' (*topia*). Pain, discomfort, suffering and deeply-held grievances are as much a driver for populist mobilization as they require appeasement and healing: the more people feel wronged by the system, the more likely it is for them to listen to populist claims of redemption that transform this psychological pain into moralized pain. The fact that status may be reaffirmed and suffering alleviated in the future brings little comfort. The narrative of dispossession, gesturing towards a past when things used to be better, makes present grievances insufferable. Populists promise to ease or heal the pain of the 'virtuous' people by redeeming democratic equality and inclusion, which they have been denied by the 'corrupt' elite: the idealized image of past or fallen equality is used to castigate the present as the living embodiment of the corruption of that ideal. The present is the culmination of all wrongs. There is an urgent need to interrupt the normal flow of time and accelerate towards the future (*utopia*, or the vision of an alternative world). Populism is progressive or forward-looking. Hope lies in the future: salvation will come in the form of the realization of the democratic promise of 'rule by the people'. The imagined future is not only immanent to the present but also *imminent*; it is not positioned in some far-off future time that can only be dimly perceived in the present and, instead, it is about to arrive through promised rupture. The populists' hope, in this way, involves a temporal orientation akin to Emmanuel Levinas's 'present of the future' (1987: 76). That is, the new age of populist fellowship, appearing in the near distance, represents a future that can almost be touched now.

The assumption here is, of course, that human effort can bring about political change, social reform and moral redemption. This places populism firmly within the remit of perfectionist politics. Much has been written on populist mobilization (Jansen, 2011; Brubaker, 2017: 4–6), including either critical references to its Caesarist/Bonapartist tendencies (Espejo, 2017; Urbinati, 1998), or approving remarks regarding its anti-elitist character (Canovan, 1999: 3–4). Yet, even in the best theoretical treatments of projects of populist mobilization, such as Jansen's, the specifically redemptive nature of populist mobilization remains elusive: '*any sustained, large-scale political project that mobilizes ordinarily marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action, while articulating an anti-*elite*, nationalist rhetoric that valorizes ordinary people*' (Jansen 2011: 82; emphasis in the original). No reference is made here to the promise of a better future that is central to any redemptive political project, populism included. This is because, even though he correctly moves away from treating populism as a *thing*, Jansen's choice of treating populism as a *practice* ultimately means that he does not address its *logic*. Once we take into account the populist logic of resentment, however, our understanding of populist mobilization is enlarged and its redemptive dimension clarified.

Populist mobilization, we argue, functions as a collective process of cleansing. Independently of the particular organizational form it eventually adopts (movement or party, charismatic leadership or horizontal platform of interests), populism seeks to purify the political body from the polluting elements that stand in the way of us getting beyond the present and moving towards the future. Resentment explains why, for the populists, the present is painful and the future must come now. But it also helps account for the specific temporality of populist mobilization. The distance between the present

and the past, a historical or archetypal democracy's golden age, is extended. Yet the distance between the present, when painful envy and indignation are experienced, and the future, when, it is hoped, suffering will give way to redemptive happiness, is compressed. This sense of urgency means that populist mobilization is not only progressive or forward-looking but immediate: any delays in achieving salvation are downright immoral. This immediacy extends to political representation, where forms of direct democracy are preferred to representative schemes of government. Representative agents cannot be trusted with undetermined time in order to solve the problems of the here and now: healing must come now. Likewise, political discourse and rhetoric acquire a simple, direct style. Any technical details and complex explanations of the sources of the problems and their solutions stand in the way of their immediate resolution.

Purification here is not simply a matter of categorizing all elements and organizations as either one of us, the people, or one of them, the elite. It involves the political work of extracting the democratic egalitarian promise from a present that denies it into a future that fulfils it. This process of moral purge entails both an element of collective effervescence (the 'enthusiasm' often associated with the 'politics of faith') as more and more elements are drawn into it, as either perpetrators or victims, and a measure of scapegoating, often in the form of conspiracy theories that identify some secretive but influential aristocratic or plutocratic 'conspiracy' responsible for defrauding the people of their rights (Nugent, 2013) and holding back their right to self-rule. While the latter is unambiguously problematic for democracy, the former is an inherent feature of collective life, able to shape identity and create social bonds (Durkheim, 1992, 1995). Yet it also carries with it the risk, as the progressive social thinker G.H. Mead would have known only too well given his first-hand knowledge of populism in the Midwest, of an absolute identification between the individual self and the social group as one gets immersed (and lost) in the collective wave of enthusiasm (Mead, 1918: 598). The populist zeal to purge the corrupt elites from the political community has the potential to devolve into vengeance and acquire an apocalyptic tone. This much is clear from a novel that Ignatius Donnelly, a Minnesota populist leader, published in 1892, the year after Mead's arrival at Michigan: *Caesar's Column*.

IV Populist redemption: The case of *Caesar's Column*

Caesar's Column is much more than a 1890s Midwest Populist novel. The plot takes us a century into the future, the protagonists come from different corners of the world to meet their destiny in New York, and as its subtitle indicates – *A Story of the Twentieth Century* – in the image of political salvation the text anticipates in important ways the future of populism itself.

If it was written and published as the term 'populist' was yet to enter the English language, *Caesar's Column* is one of the few cases where a utopian novel actually inspired a political programme. Some of the more programmatic passages of *Caesar's Column* can be found in the preamble Donnelly wrote for the Omaha platform, which launched the Populist Party on 4 July 1892. A bestseller with 700,000 copies sold within the first decade of publication (Ruddick, 2003: xiii), *Caesar's Column*'s vitriol and anti-Semitic references eventually secured it a place among populism's canon of damned

works (Rideout, 1960; Hofstadter, 1955: 104–8; Handlin, 1954: 185–90). A political text, in which the author expresses his populist views, it is also and fundamentally a work of fiction. Part of the wave of utopian novels that took America by storm in the late 19th century (Pfaelzer, 1984), *Caesar's Column* offers an apocalyptic vision of a future where elites insist on ignoring the suffering of the poor.

Caesar's Column asks the reader for an imaginative answer to an implied rhetorical question: 'What if?' What if the people turned against itself? It is around this question that Donnelly constructs one of the most complex and ambivalent dystopias in American literature. The immediate political and socio-economic context this rhetorical question poses is characterized by deep social unrest, a profound economic crisis and the concomitant mobilization of the labour movement. As with any utopia, *Caesar's Column* overshoots this immediate context and points towards future social and political alternatives. But as an *apocalyptic* utopia (Jaher, 1964: 130–41), the only species of utopia that fills in the space between the question 'What if?' and the answer by representing the transition from present to the future, *Caesar's Column* uniquely offers a glimpse both of a latent warning – 'the danger of impending labor violence' (Pfaelzer, 1984: 139) – and of its proposed remedy: a populist utopia, born out of the destruction of the old social order.

This uneasy balance between 'fear images' and 'wish images', in Elias' parlance (Elias in Kilminster, 2014: 6), structures the whole plot. The feeling of estrangement this provokes in the readers of *Caesar's Column* is undeniable. In a first moment it leads readers to relativize both present and future, which then leads them to the instant realization of how malleable and contingent both temporal dimensions really are. This is how *Caesar's Column* passes through and disrupts the material and ideological contexts where it originated. By presenting a detailed image of a radically and unexpectedly new – what Bloch calls the *Novum* – and a glimpse into the *Ultimum* – the 'total leap out of everything that previously existed' (cited in Wegner, 2002: 20) – this singularly ambivalent cataclysmic utopia astonishes whoever reads it.

The central 'fear image' is, of course, that of Caesar's column. This column represents the symbolic and physical destruction of the old capitalist social order as its inner core is made of a quarter of a million corpses. However, as with Bolivar's *mestizo* transmogrification, this is no empty symbolic sign whose meaning is arbitrary, but an 'index' (Peirce, 1955: 102; 107–8) whose materiality indicates its meaning – the destroyed political body as a result of unbridled envy and anger. Indices allow us to represent emotions which cannot be represented directly. Caesar's column allows Donnelly to represent the *logic* of resentment: the column is not resentment, it is not a direct representation of resentment, but it indicates resentment and is connected to it. To get his readers to this dystopian populist index, Donnelly makes use of the well-known literary device of narrating a succession of imaginary letters. The narrator and protagonist is one Gabriel Weltstein. Gabriel, who is attempting to break an international cartel and to sell his wool directly to American manufacturers and retailers, writes back to his brother Heinrich in their homeland in Uganda, here presented as a Swiss colony, from a futuristic New York set in 1988. The path taken by Gabriel, from his first arrival in New York up to the macabre erection of a column made entirely of body remains in Union Square, reveals Donnelly's anxieties and preoccupations. This path constitutes the

bulk of the novel. As readers are taken along this path, the feeling of estrangement they experience makes them all the more susceptible to Donnelly's social criticisms, both implicit and explicit, that he makes through his alter-ego, Gabriel Weltstein.

Strolling near Central Park, Gabriel suddenly notices a beggar about to be run over by an open carriage: with no hesitation, our hero jumps to intervene and saves the day. With this single event, Donnelly manages to introduce most of the characters and set the plot in motion. The beggar turns out to be Max Petion, 'a 'Have' who has joined with the 'Have-Not's' and who maintains a complicated relationship with both' (Rideout, 1960: xxix), soon to become Gabriel's best friend. The car belongs to Prince Cabano, 'the wealthiest and most vindictive man in the city' (Donnelly, 1890: 27), a Jewish-Italian industrial count and one of the novel's villains. One of its occupants is Estella Washington, who will eventually fall in love with our protagonist. If friendship and love bring the protagonists together, hatred and resentment will tear society apart.

Events are suddenly unleashed by a fortuitous event between two secondary characters: a French girl, Celestine d'Aublay, a 'former favorite mistress of' our villain who 'resented her downfall bitterly', and her rival, Frederika: 'A sudden thought took possession of her mind; she would overthrow Frederika just as she herself had been overthrown' (Donnelly, 1890: 74). This private rivalry foreshadows the wider conflict that looms outside. This conflict is primarily socioeconomic in character. On the one hand, there are the corrupt rich, which Donnelly represents as 'the oligarchy'. Although they rule the world, what fans the anger of the many is the oligarchs' accumulation of wealth. On the other hand, there is the 'Brotherhood of Destruction'. This is a secret international society made of Have-Nots, who have been long subject to cruel exploitation and are now seeking revenge.

What moves the oligarchy and the Brotherhood of Destruction against each other is resentment. Yet this is not socio-political resentment, targeting and mobilizing followers around the experience of injustice. Although feelings of moral indignation grounded on democratic ideals do figure in *Caesar's Column*, they appear as inert signs of a bygone era, unable to change the course of events. The book speaks to our times, with their explosive combination of mass democracy and rising inequality, seen by many as resulting from unjust institutions or, at least, as not advancing their prospects, as the least advantaged. It projects them as at times inviting a slide from socio-political resentment to Nietztschean *ressentiment*, and irrational envy detached from its moral element, triggering a rise of 'the many' against 'the few' whose net gain is dystopian for all: the end of civilization itself. Torn between generalized feelings of *nemesis* and *phthonos*, the different faces of the most dangerous civic emotion of all, society is doomed.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the conflict between the representative heads of the many and the few: Caesar Lomellini, the commander-in-chief of the Brotherhood, and Prince Cabano. Blinded by Nemesis, the Greek goddess of vengeance, Caesar, once a 'quiet, peaceable industrious' farmer who lost everything to the extortionist usury of urban bankers, now sees nothing but getting back at his nemesis, Prince Cabano, the living embodiment of the system responsible for Caesar's downfall. But what was at first *nemesis* – moral resentment – industrial capitalism has turned into envy-based *ressentiment*. *Ressentiment* is not merely a sub-logic that organizes emotions and passions, making them the basis of political agency; there is also a definite somatic dimension to it

(Chrostowska, 2017: 273). Caesar's body changes as the revolt progresses, his physical mutations being a result of Donnelly's own political and racial anxieties (e.g. Donnelly, 1890: 149) concerning the 'immigrant-worker-anarchist-socialist complex' (Wegner, 2002: 123). No less importantly, this transmogrification is also a projection of populist hopes and fears: Caesar's body, after all, represents the populist people. It functions as another populist index. Caesar's body is not the populist people, it is not a direct representation of the populist people, but it points to and is connected to it. This is why Caesar's death represents the impending threat of populism. The world is corrupt; it needs redemption. Where inequalities are so great that they erode self-respect, democide will follow. This is reinforced by a concomitant transformation of the physical space. New York's streets and buildings are not simply where action takes place; they are themselves part-and-parcel of this imaginary transmutation animated by resentment turned into radical envy, becoming darker and narrower as capitalist society moves toward apocalypse.

After destruction comes redemption. Resorting to imagery from the Book of Revelation, *Caesar's Column* presents the populist revolt as punishment and purgation. For Donnelly, 'redemptive' is the adjective that might apply to the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary, the death of the One for the salvation of the many. It may also be taken to mean the murder of outsiders, leaving 'the people' free to undertake a project of populist politics that might redeem the lost democratic order. In the novel, Gabriel and his friends manage to escape death at the 11th hour by flying to safety in distant Uganda. 'Uganda' functions here as a 'wish image' that enables Donnelly to answer the second, positive part of his 'What if' question: what if one could tame resentment and make the populist people sovereign? What would a populist 'scheme of government' (Donnelly, 1890: 303) look like?

Having protected themselves from others by building a 'high wall' so as to 'completely cut off communication with the external world' (Donnelly, 1890: 300), a typical populist icon (Peirce, 1955) and highly significant political strategy (e.g. Brown, 2010), they turn to a second task: how to '*protect ourselves from ourselves*; for the worst enemies of a people are always found in their own midst, in their passions and vanities' (Donnelly, 1890: 301). Having just presented the apocalyptic consequences of the most powerful and dangerous passion, Donnelly wants his readers to see the positive, redemptive side of resentment. This takes us to a future populist utopia where the 'people' has been constructed as to avoid the misgivings of both liberal democracy and of 'Karl Marx and the German socialists of the last century' (Donnelly, 1890: 161). Donnelly names the governing body of his utopia, 'the people'. Adopting a corporatist model of political representation, which makes it dependent on a pre-political division of the political body according to each group's occupations, 'the people' is segmented into three branches, each elected exclusively by and from a specific corporation: producers, merchants and manufacturers, and intellectuals (Donnelly, 1890: 304). 'The people' signals the co-presence of both variants of utopianism in the text, open-ended and programmatic. This, in turn, mirrors the equivalent ambivalence of redemptive populist politics as social text. Examining it enables us to address anew a number of significant issues regarding not only the character of redemptive/utopian politics but also of populism, namely in its relationship with democracy.

Caesar's Column, with its 'ambiguous signals and complex structure' (Saxton, 1967: 232), provides a near-perfect illustration of how resentment in *topia* gives populists the (critical and antinomian) redemptive impulse towards *utopia* in the form of the promise of a better world through action of the sovereign people. Unlike ideologies, however, populism does not seriously attempt to reach the future beyond the break. As Canovan observes, the redemptive impulse is left relatively unarticulated by populists, carrying 'with it much less by way of a vividly imagined utopia than most forms of socialism', which prefigure ideals of emancipation and progress (1999: 11). But the redemptive impulse is not absent either. Rather, it serves the quite different function of transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come. Concretely, populism's redemption without outlook is most salient where resentment folds into the sub-logic of *ressentiment*. As radical envy, populism offers collective healing through burdens imposed on others, with potentially little consideration of benefits to oneself in a 'new' order. As envy detaches from its moral element – namely, the failed democratic principles – redress beyond these burdens, or even beyond mere revenge – can cease to be a central concern (e.g. what is a substantial wealth tax going to be used *for*?). Moreover, as radical envy is not limited to material considerations, populism as *ressentiment* can slide into xenophobia and racism, with prejudice concerning 'ethnic descent coupled with discriminatory action' (Bethencourt, 2014: 1). A further risk is, of course, political violence. As the apocalyptic *Caesar's Column* makes abundantly clear, the road to metaphysical redemption can be a dangerous one, leaving many corpses, including that of democracy, behind.

Populism performatively constructs 'crisis' as internal to the previously hegemonic order (Moffit, 2015) in order to position itself as the agent of its negation. Populism's negative character far outweighs its positive dimension. Yet the populist re-democratization impetus involves a modicum of future orientation. Populists enact both negation and future orientation in the name of a dispossessed people, entitled to resent the suppression of their grievances, the wounding of their identity, and the hegemonic order's denial of what is perceived as rightly theirs – their status, their self-esteem, political leverage, control over affairs.

Populist politics presents itself as a redemptive politics engaged in *re*gaining possession. But the implied temporality is deceptive. While the 're-' might suggest a retrogressive intent, it refers less to a concrete historical past, to which one might return, than to an archetypal democracy tainted by democratic society's failure to realize its own principles. The sense of loss implied by the 're-' is instrumental to the mobilization of resentment, as an affective means for the registration of injustice that might activate disruption and inform transformation. Populism's redemptive impetus is thus future-looking, even if the future is left broadly unchartered. For populism has typically less to say about an alternative end state than about desires, needs and aspirations the prevailing order has ceased to hear or satisfy.

The agrarian populist utopia in *Caesar's Column* is an exception in this respect. It elaborates a blueprint, a positive image of redemption, envisioning a perfect state. In doing so it installs an ambiguity in the text: is the 'fear image' in the first part constructed for preventive effects – i.e. to prompt transformation through the authorities' engagement with the reasons for building resentment; or is the perfect state articulated in part

two meant to vindicate the violence in part one as the only way to attain redemption? The parts are severed, and it is not clear what is expected to bridge them.

On the ground, however, the American populist agrarian utopia took a very different shape: that of an everyday utopia (Cooper, 2013). Instead of dreams of a better world, this everyday utopia engaged practical experimentation in seeking to create it. Imperfect and immersed in dangers, it demonstrated that the present admitted different possibilities, some of which came to fertilize progressive politics decades after the experiment's demise. For all its flaws, the development of cooperative institutions, aiming to rein in competition, exploitation and corruption in the name of democracy's egalitarian commitments, involved a 'conflation of movement ends and means', 'an enactment of the ultimate values of an ideal society within the very means of struggle for that society' (Maeckelbergh, 2011: 302). These offered the context for sharpening a vision, as populists reworked the terms of their living together and their self-rule in experimenting with them. The populists' practical enactment of demotic power (Frank, 2018) witnessed contestation, setbacks and eventual demise precluding definitive redemption. All of these are things violently purged from Connelly's blueprint. But they left a progressive legacy unmatched by Connelly's static agrarian paradise.

Populism is sometimes compared to the honeybee: it is thought to sting and then die. The sting comes from the understanding of populist resentment as an affective register of democratic ailing capable of sending shock waves through the system. The dying refers primarily to what is perceived as populism's failure to move from discrete grievances to the articulation and furthering of cohesive demands and the collective subject that may sustain them: the coalition of the resentful will often devolve into a coalition of paralysis. The suggestion of a quick cycle from sting to death implies that populist disruption is of little consequence, leaving the resentful the same or – given the potential counter-productive effects of radical envy – perhaps even worse off. Hence the conclusion: populism is *at best* remedial; *in most cases*, futile; and *at worst* fatal, ending in self-destruction. Where populism invites violence toward members of one's community (those construed as out-groups chiefly comprised therein), there are strong moral reasons to condemn it. Otherwise, the ready condemnation of populism as undemocratic or even uncivil becomes status quo-affirming. For as long as populist indignation and even populist envy present as their object the violation of democratic principles and norms, fellow-democrats owe the resentful their engagement, even if, or perhaps especially if, they believe the normative violation to be equivocated – either about what might be unjust about what is being affectively registered as injustice or about how it may be addressed. Resentment at the world as it is offers to all an opportunity to revisit critically the present in the light of what it should be and the ways in which this 'should' is being (fallibly) practically enacted. And this is a quest that might not get underway except for the threat of bitter resentment.

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Author biographies

Filipe Carreira da Silva is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of the Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon and a Fellow of Selwyn College, Cambridge University. He specializes in social theory. He is the author of *Mead and Modernity* (2008) and the co-author (with Patrick Baert) of *Social Theory in the Twentieth Century and Beyond* (2010).

Mónica Brito Vieira is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of York, UK. She specializes in the history of political thought and in normative political theory. She is the author of *The Elements of Representation in Hobbes: Aesthetics, Theatre, Law and Theology in the Construction of Hobbes's Theory of the State* (2009) and the co-author (with David Runciman) of *Representation* (2008).