



The Psychology of Populism: Tribal Challenges to Liberal Democracy

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Abstract

The rise of both left-wing and right-wing populism presents a serious challenge for liberal democracies. Whereas liberal democracy assumes that political choices are based on rational, tolerant and pragmatic considerations, populism is a fundamentally collectivist, anti-individualist and anti-Enlightenment tribal ideology. This paper explores the psychological needs that populism exploits, and the reasons it so easily attracts followers. Populist movements cater to the evolutionary propensity of people to seek positive group identity, moral absolutism, simplicity and epistemic certainty. The strategies employed by populist narratives and leaders to satisfy the psychological expectations of their followers is discussed. The paper proposes that in order to contain the threat to liberal democracy, it is essential to gain a better understanding of the psychological mechanisms that populist movements routinely exploit.

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Foreword: Populism and the End of the Enlightenment?

Coarsened political discourse has become a dismal, if familiar, feature of many democratic societies in recent years. Critics usually cite former US President Donald Trump as the worst example, but this is to confuse coarseness with vulgarity. Behaviour is only part of the problem.

It extends to the reduced esteem in which the institutions of political life are held. A growing indifference to the distinction between truth and falsehood, for example, and the readiness with which political leaders abandon previously declared obligations — should they prove inconvenient or burdensome — are also important features. They combine to contribute to a diminished political and social culture in which appeal is frequently made to that portion of the population considered invisible and which feels ignored by so-called ‘elites’.

This style of politics is the essence of populism; a phenomenon that has been resurgent in many Western democracies. It has displaced the oppositional style of politics, traditionally characterised by left-wing and right-wing positions, with a conflictual style that contrasts the virtuous with the villainous. The demarcation is often presented as an absolute one that denies any possibility for compromise or reasoned engagement: those whom the populist leader attracts as followers are

always in the right; those who are denounced by the leader are beyond redemption.

But there is more to populism than politics. While it may find political expression as promises to secure correction of injustice or equitable distribution of resources and opportunity, Professor Joseph Forgas argues that a full explanation of populism's appeal must take into account human psychology and the evolutionary roots of humankind.

As tribal creatures, human beings derive feelings of comfort and security from membership of the group. Exclusion from that group is painful and disorientating; and the threat of such exclusion always serves as an effective form of sanction. We need to belong, and to *know* that we belong. Is it any wonder that the politics of identity retains its powerful attraction for so many? Forgas argues that any account of populism that ignores the complexities of human psychology will be partial, at best.

He is very clear that our yearning for a sense of collective identity is deeply rooted in our psychology. But if that's the case, what are we to make of the Enlightenment and its commitments to liberty, tolerance and individual autonomy?

Forgas sounds a stern warning that if we are serious about preserving the legacy of the Enlightenment, we must not take it for granted. He even entertains the sobering possibility that, far from being an era that established immutable truths about the human condition, conferring singular significance upon the individual, the Enlightenment might be understood more appropriately as a brief and interesting interruption in our post-Paleolithic development.

He leaves us in no doubt that he thinks populism poses a serious threat to liberal democracy — a threat that we must take seriously. Rather than simply throwing his hands up in despair, he urges us not simply to react in political terms to what is going on around us but to understand why and how populism retains such significant appeal.

The *Culture, Prosperity & Civil Society* program at the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) has been concerned with the impact of

populism, particularly as it is manifested in the cultural forms of cancel culture and identity politics. The assertion of group primacy at the expense of the individual, coupled with mounting intolerance of any expression of dissent, threatens the very principles of a secular liberal democracy to which CIS remains committed to defend.

In this important essay, Forgas reminds us that steadfast defence is of the highest importance and that what we value must never be taken for granted. No matter what we assume about the inevitability of human progress, our psychological make-up bears a Paleolithic imprint that may yet override our Enlightened sensibilities.

Peter Kurti
The Centre for Independent Studies

Introduction

In recent years, populist politics have made a remarkable comeback in many countries — including developed Western democracies as well as countries with weaker democratic traditions.¹ In the former, populism flourishes when segments of the population feel disenfranchised due to economic, social, racial or ethnic upheavals, and leaders offer narratives of betrayal by liberal elites to gain ascendancy. Perceived threats to a group's cultural identity create especially fertile ground for populist reactions.² In fragile emerging democracies, populist leaders can acquire power by appealing to economic dissatisfaction, but more commonly wounded national pride, and religious, racial or ethnic grievances (e.g. Putin, Orban, Erdogan, Kaczynski).

Interestingly, adverse economic and social conditions are not by themselves sufficient for populism to flourish. Humans mostly lived in abject conditions throughout history, yet populist revolts were very rare.³ What is also essential is a persuasive psychological *narrative* that turns dissatisfaction into a potent political force. Populist support is much stronger among people with such a well-articulated narrative.⁴

Contemporary populism includes both left-wing and right-wing movements that employ similar psychological strategies but differ in the content of their narratives.⁵ Right-wing populism typically emphasises a nativist ideology, and the importance of order, structure, predictability and conservatism. Left-wing populists are more concerned with economic, ethnic and racial inequality; employing narratives that are cloaked in the guise of well-meaning, utopian social justice theories advocating state power, redistribution and collectivism

(e.g. cultural marxism, critical race theory). The totalitarian excesses of left-wing identity politics and tribalism are no less dangerous than right-wing populism, and often provoke extreme right-wing reactions.⁶

Populism, although difficult to define,⁷ is marked by several common features. It is a collectivist conflict ideology that contrasts the people with an allegedly ‘elite’ class of oppressors, idealises the people as an unquestionable reference group, considers its own ideology to be morally absolute, and advocates a hierarchical, autocratic system that repudiates individual freedoms and minority rights. Populism is thus an archaic, collectivist tribal ideology that typically — but not exclusively — emphasises the primacy of the group over the individual.

The common juxtaposition of populism and democracy can be confusing, since both terms mean rule by the people (*demos* in Greek, and *populus* in Latin — although populist leaders are labelled demagogues). Over centuries, democratic systems invented increasingly precise and refined techniques to translate popular will into limited executive power. Populism in contrast remains a simplistic manichean credo emphasising the moral superiority of the ‘people’ against its enemies.⁸ Because populism invokes an absolutist and intolerant concept of majoritarian popular sovereignty, it challenges liberal democracy by rejecting such constraining principles as the rule of law, minority rights, checks and balances, and the separation of powers. Populist narratives are psychologically attractive because — unlike liberal democracy — they offer simplicity, cognitive certainty, moral absolutism, positive tribal identity, and utopistic ideation.⁹

Democracy and populism also differ in their assumptions about human nature and our fundamental cognitive abilities.¹⁰ Unlike democracy, which assumes a universal human ability for more-or-less dispassionate, rational decision-making, populism exploits our ancient evolutionary tendency for tribalism. It was only after centuries of horrific religious bloodshed in Europe that the revolutionary ideology of the Enlightenment first challenged the primacy of absolute group identification and replaced it with the philosophy of the free and independent individual; inaugurating probably the most successful civilisation yet in human history.¹¹

Liberal individualism has withstood repeated challenges by romanticism, fascism and communism. The recent spread of populism represents but the latest attack on the values of the Enlightenment — the atavistic re-emergence of the age-old psychology of tribalism as an alternative to individualism and freedom. How can we explain this dramatic turning away from such a successful system?¹²

Speculations about causes abound.¹³ Growing economic inequality, secularisation, historical amnesia about the horrors of war, threatened group identities, and the spread of social media can all contribute to populist ideologies. In political discourse, we are slowly abandoning the fundamental norms of liberalism identified by John Stuart Mill — tolerance and freedom of speech — replaced by increasingly shrill populist strategies successfully employed by demagogues on both the left and the right.¹⁴ The rise of identity-based politics is replacing the old norms of individualism, universal humanism and rational decision making. Consensus and compromise are supplanted by implacable polarisation and animosity.

Understanding populism requires a systematic understanding of how people mentally represent political reality. The idea that political systems must ultimately reflect human nature goes back to Plato, as all phenomena of society are also phenomena of human nature.¹⁵ Understanding contemporary populism thus requires a psychological exploration of the mental representations of its followers.

The Evolutionary Background: Populism as the Politics of the Paleolithic

Populism often succeeds by exploiting fundamental characteristics of human psychology, appealing to the tribal mentality of the paleolithic, when group cohesion was the key requirement for survival.¹⁶ There is good evidence that the evolution of the prodigious intellectual capacities of humans was not primarily driven by the rational demands of understanding reality, but by the far more pressing cognitive demands of maintaining social cohesion,¹⁷ the foundation of our evolutionary success. In our ancestral environment mental habits were shaped by the demands of group integration; discovering truth came a distant second to this imperative. As Nobel Prize winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman argued, a lot of thinking is automatic and intuitive and not founded on logical reasoning. Most of the things we believe, we do so for reasons that have very little to do with logic.¹⁸

This ‘social brain’ hypothesis is also consistent with the work of the evolutionary biologist Robin Dunbar at Oxford who argued that brain development was primarily driven by the demands of group cohesion and cooperation. Dunbar found that in primates brain capacity is closely correlated with group size. Humans have the largest brains, capable of coordinating the largest group of any primate, estimated to be about 150 people in our ancestral environment. This is the average size of most nomadic groups, most medieval villages, and most basic

military units from Roman legions to the present. Many of our basic mental habits were probably shaped by the requirements of our stone-age ancestral environment; tribal habits that now make us vulnerable to populist ideologies.

Populism is avowedly collectivist, challenging the individualistic and humanist traditions of liberal democracies, appealing to deeply-felt human needs for simplicity, certainty and group identification.¹⁹ All populist ideologies feature an uncompromising collectivist narrative envisioning a struggle between the favoured ‘ingroup’ and its enemies (class conflict in Marxism, Blacks vs Whites in critical race theory, etc.). Such manichean ideologies deny the legitimacy or even possibility of individual freedom and choice.

The Psychological Attractions of Populism

Populism appeals to our evolutionary vulnerability to tribal communalism. The need to maintain effective group cooperation shaped the human brain and our thinking, with rational thinking a much later and more fragile achievement.²⁰ Cultural evolution — the changing ‘software’ of our thinking, such as Enlightenment norms and values — can supplant these archaic tendencies for a while, producing the spectacular achievements of the last few hundred years of Western civilization. Yet our stone-age mental habits are still with us, and our brief epoch of liberal democracy may yet represent a brief aberration from our long-standing tradition of collectivism. What makes tribal populism so attractive?

The Need for Positive Group Identity

The need for positive identity is a fundamental human evolutionary feature. Experiences of deprivation and uncertainty readily activate the aching need for meaning, significance and certainty; often achieved through affiliation with a valued identity group.²¹ The universal power of group identification was most convincingly demonstrated by Henri Tajfel, social psychologist at Bristol University, himself a holocaust survivor.

Tajfel wanted to understand the minimum conditions necessary for people to identify with an ‘ingroup’ and discriminate against an ‘outgroup’. In his classical ‘minimal group’ experiments participants

were randomly assigned to arbitrary ‘groups’, for example, by flipping a coin. Next, they were asked to distribute rewards (money, etc.) between two anonymous strangers described only as ingroup or outgroup members. Strikingly, this meaningless ‘minimal’ group membership was sufficient to produce strong ingroup favouritism and discrimination against outgroups — suggesting that humans possess a universal evolutionary tendency for group identification.²²

The desire for positive group identity often leads to *collective narcissism*, when challenged groups claim illusory virtues and fictitious achievements. Collective narcissism was found to be a reliable predictor of joining populist movements in countries such as the US, Britain, Poland, and Hungary.²³ Populist propaganda often manipulates feelings of grievance and collective narcissism, glorifying the imaginary greatness of the ingroup and deprecating its enemies. This strategy has been used by Putin, Orban, Kaczynski and Erdogan.²⁴ Collective narcissism triggers hypersensitivity to perceived attacks on our group, and populist leaders often emphasise the relentless struggle against the group’s enemies.

Cognitive Distortions

Populism is often attractive because it exploits the human cognitive tendency to categorise, use heuristics, and seek simplicity and certainty. The ability to categorise simplifies reality in order to codify quick and effortless reactions, promoting cognitive efficiency. Without categorisation, the world would appear chaotic, with every new experience unique and requiring laborious interpretation. But categorisation also leads to simplification, stereotyping, and the tendency to see the world in terms of simple black-and-white typologies instead of subtle shades of grey.

Where do our categories come from? Philosophers like Plato and Aristotle thought they arise naturally, based on ‘essential features’ that define natural categories. Cognitive research shows that categorisation is much more flexible; and mental inclinations as well as propagandistic labels readily serve as anchors for categories. Populist narratives cater

to our mental need for simplification, carving up the world into simple categories of us versus them, good versus bad, the people versus elites. Their job would be much harder if the human mind was not so well prepared to act upon such exhortations.

The *illusory correlation* effect is a good example of how our simplifying mental habits can promote populism and produce xenophobia and ingroup bias. Illusory correlations occur when people overestimate the correlation between unusual, negative behaviours and unfamiliar people, producing incorrect stereotypes. In our ancestral environment, such a cognitive bias made adaptive sense, as hypervigilance in linking unusual behaviours with unknown people may indeed have served a useful alerting function.²⁵

Another basic evolutionary feature of human cognition is *cognitive fluency* effects — the tendency to overestimate the reliability, importance and truthfulness of information that happens to be easy to process.²⁶ Several studies found that people overestimate the truth of statements that are easy to read, simple to understand and require little cognitive effort. Populist messages are typically simple and cognitively undemanding, exploiting the fluency effect to enhance their perceived truth.

Populism also exploits the *confirmation bias*, the human tendency to prefer and selectively remember information that supports our pre-existing beliefs, and ignore disconfirming information. Confirmation bias promotes the polarisation of attitudes and the perseverance of erroneous beliefs — key features of populist ideation. Confirmation bias is promoted by people's limited cognitive capacity, and the motivation to maintain a coherent and integrated belief system. Safeguarding the established consensual view of reality, rather than seeking truth, may also be adaptive. Human cognition seems optimised to reduce the most costly errors such as creating dissension and uncertainty.

Classic populist ideologies such as Marxism exploit the confirmation bias by offering an intrinsically unfalsifiable belief system.²⁷ Some recent populist ideologies go further by denying any possibility of objective evidence, as do many post-modernist, deconstructionist

‘critical’ social justice theories. By denying the relevance of evidence, unfalsifiable claims of ‘lived experience’ now allow neo-marxist and post-modernist ideologies to deny the possibility of proof; promoting populist illusions of certainty and superiority. Remarkably, resistance to disconfirming information is all too common even among highly-qualified but ideologically-committed intellectuals.²⁸

Similar mechanisms also contribute to the resilience of bizarre conspiracy theories. History is replete with examples of the confirmation bias sustaining absurd beliefs: medieval witch trials, religious wars, mass delusions, belief in human sacrifice, paranormal beliefs and the QAnon cult all benefit from confirmation bias.

Another well-established cognitive bias is the *Dunning-Krueger effect*, or the ‘illusion of superiority’.²⁹ This occurs when poorly-informed people overestimate their expertise to make competent judgments. People’s inability to recognise their lack of competence is partly due to inflated self-assessment, frequently exploited by populist ideologies. Overestimating our competence is also driven by ignorance of the required standards of evaluation. Better training in rational judgment — not surprisingly — tends to reduce the Dunning-Krueger effect.

Human information processing is shaped by a preference for certainty, simplicity and consensus. Our symbolic ability to receive secondhand verbal information from others and treat it as reality expands personal experiences and is the basis of the cultural transmission of knowledge.³⁰ In ancestral primary groups, communicators were intimately known and could be held responsible for their messages. This is no longer the case in modern mass societies where many of the political and commercial messages we receive are from strangers, often exploiting our evolutionary tendency for gullibility.³¹ Populist movements capitalise on the human tendency for gullibility by ignoring truth, giving their narratives an undeserved edge in the formation of political attitudes.

Emotional Processes

Affective states influence all human social behaviour, and political preferences are no exception.³² Feelings like anger, fear, disgust or envy play a crucial role in populist appeals. *Fear* is often employed by populist politicians, activating an evolutionary tendency to seek safety in stricter collective norms, tighter group coordination, and intolerance for deviation.³³ ‘Tight’ societies have strong norms and punishments for noncompliance, while ‘loose’ societies have weaker norms and greater individual freedom. Cross-cultural research shows that threats promote ‘tightness’ and support for autocratic and populist leaders, just as fear triggered by disease or warfare produces demands for tight rules, as the recent COVID pandemic illustrates.

Anger is also an important feature of both left-wing (Black Lives Matter, Antifa) and right-wing (Tea Party, Proud Boys) populist movements. Unlike fear, anger results in a narrowed cognitive focus, tunnel vision and often motivates aggression.³⁴ Populist narratives frequently cultivate feelings of grievance for past wrongs, producing anger and demand for retribution. Cognitive biases (confirmation bias, categorisation, illusory correlations) further accentuate narratives of grievance and magnify intergroup conflict.

Fear, grievance and anger in turn can eventually lead to *disgust* — a powerful emotion that in our evolutionary past signalled the presence of contamination and the need for cleansing and elimination. Disgust is one of the effective emotions exploited in populist aggression, legitimising ethnic violence and genocide by depicting enemies as subhuman contaminants to be cleansed.

What Populism Offers

Given our vulnerability to populist appeals considered above, what are the psychological comforts that populist movements *offer* to their followers?

Moral Absolutism

The moral absolutism offered by populism can be highly attractive for many people. Representing ‘the people’ appears uncontestedly virtuous, and therefore all opposition is evil.³⁵ Such populist intolerance rejects the Enlightenment values of open, rational exchange, denying the moral legitimacy of any opposition.³⁶ Human evolutionary history predisposes us to seek high moral status, accentuating the appeal of ideologies that offer the benefits of virtue-signalling.³⁷ Followers of populist left-wing movements such as cancel culture or woke-ism often seek to outdo each other in attacking those seen as deviants in a righteous display of moral fervour.³⁸

On the political right, populist moral imperatives are often based on either religious, nationalistic or ethnic value systems. In a display of such self-aggrandising absolutism, Hungary’s Orban, for example, claimed after losing an election that the motherland (i.e. him and his cronies) “cannot be in opposition”.³⁹ The same absolutism was displayed when Democrat US politicians labelled Trump’s voters ‘deplorables’, or Trump declared the press as enemies of the people, introducing a degree of *ad hominem* intolerance into political discourse.

On the left, marxism also exploits moral absolutism already evident

in the Bolshevik ('majority') putsch in Russia, who saw dissenters as enemies of the people to be vanquished (as many were). Fascists and marxists share the same 'ends justify the means' ideology. Neo-marxist social justice movements (Black Lives Matter, Antifa, etc.) embrace moral absolutism, and 'woke' cancel culture is committed to personally attacking people they disagree with.⁴⁰ Although fascism now has few credible adherents, remarkably, cultural marxism still retains a puzzling attraction for many intellectuals.

Mocking, denigrating and personally attacking those who disagree is a common thread in populist politics. As Niall Ferguson noted, there is a kind of low-level totalitarianism detectable in many institutions today — from elite universities to newspapers, publishers and technology companies — which reveals that practices such as informing, denunciation and defamation can all flourish even in the absence of a one-party dictatorship.⁴¹ Within this totalitarian mindset, even *reserving* judgment is unacceptable, as confirmed by bizarre slogans such as 'silence is violence' seen at Black Lives Matter rallies. Populism represents a fundamental threat to democracy because it denies the legitimacy of any view other than its own.

Epistemic Certainty

Seeking predictability and security is a perennial human quest, and populism excels in offering epistemic certainty.⁴² Populists exploit common failures of inductive reasoning, essentially offering certainties where none can be had.⁴³ Facing complex and often unmanageable cognitive demands, humans often prefer simple but incorrect explanations to complex yet more correct ones, especially if they are also shared by others.⁴⁴

Marxism again is an excellent example of a well-rehearsed populist ideology offering the comforts of epistemic certainty. It claims to be a scientific theory, yet its assertions are epistemologically unfalsifiable and unsupported by either empirical or historical evidence.⁴⁵ Classic marxist claims that all profit is theft and that only labour produces value are appealingly simple but utterly wrong; ignoring contrary

evidence by Adam Smith and David Ricardo who preceded Marx by decades. The marxist theory of history as a series of class conflicts and necessary revolutions also offers certainty and simplicity unsupported by evidence, commanding progressive forces to advance the inevitable revolution. In populist ideologies, the comforts of certainty, simplicity and moral absolutism triumph over truth and analysis.

Self-delusion then replaces reality. Once the epistemic certainty of revolutionary marxism was undermined by history and the absence of the predicted proletarian revolution — and the horrors of the Soviet communist system became undeniable — many marxists turned to postmodernism, or ‘critical theory’, a safe haven from falsification by denying even the possibility of proof.⁴⁶ Cultural marxism remains attractive precisely because it offers epistemic certainty immune to disproof, a fundamental challenge to rational liberal values. Woke notions like ‘critical race theory’ or ‘oppressive patriarchy’ simplify very complicated social phenomena to simple-minded one-dimensional explanations. Claims that every white person is a racist have no obvious explanatory or discriminatory utility, but serve well as a simplistic tribal rallying cry.

Epistemic certainty makes rational discourse impossible. Populism is dangerous precisely because it appeals to those craving certainty above truth.⁴⁷ The liberal preference for open debate is incompatible with populist ideology.⁴⁸ Given the authoritarian culture and pseudo-certainty of both left-wing and right-wing populists, there is a danger of losing the ability to communicate as public life becomes increasingly polarised.

Tribalism: Belonging and Significance

Human evolutionary success owes much to our unparalleled ability to form and manage cohesive social groups. Populists exploit this propensity for tribalism by offering belonging, status and significance to followers.⁴⁹ Our unique capacity for symbolic thought allowed shared fictional belief systems to define tribal group identity.⁵⁰ Many pre-liberal civilisations defined themselves by creating elaborate

fictional narratives invoking divine rulers, magic, witchcraft, human sacrifice, creation myths as well as lurid theories about a promised afterlife to promote group cohesion and integration.

The populist appeal to tribalism is again well illustrated by marxism that sees even individual consciousness as a tribal product, objectively determined by economic circumstances and class membership.⁵¹ False consciousness and exclusion from the tribe is the fate of those who fail to develop the ‘right’ consciousness based on their pre-assigned class ideology. Neo-marxist ‘social justice’ movements similarly insist that identity group membership must determine a person’s thinking, status and values. Accordingly, a gay person who criticizes LGBQT+ ideology is not really *gay* (e.g. Douglas Murray), a feminist who questions gender orthodoxy cannot be a real *feminist* (e.g. Germaine Greer) and a black person who is conservative (e.g. the economist Thomas Sowell) is not really *black*.⁵²

Tribalism can be especially attractive when lack of personal achievement or traumatic group experiences require narrative explanation, often built around narcissistic themes of injustice, betrayal, powerlessness, and victim mentality.⁵³ Populism becomes a truly dynamic political force when autocratic leaders successfully exploit the tribal motivations fuelled by compromised group identity.⁵⁴

Anti-elitism can be an important feature of emergent tribal populism. Populist claims about betrayal of ‘the people’ by the ‘elites’ often contain an element of truth. This was the case in the 2008 Global Financial Crisis when banking elites escaped retribution for their misdeeds. In many Western societies, ‘elites’ and voters differ on divisive progressive issues such as migration, political correctness and identity politics, and ‘elites’ can circumvent democratic processes and impose their views on society. This was the case with US President Obama’s Executive Order on immigration, Germany’s ‘Willkommenskultur’, and many elite judicial decisions on sensitive matters such as abortion or gay marriage.

As philosophers like Roger Scruton and public intellectuals like Douglas Murray⁵⁵ argued, the political elite in many Western

democracies has become captive to the ideological left, promoting left-wing policies against the beliefs of large sections of the electorate. The inability of many democracies to develop a migration policy acceptable to most voters inevitably contributed to the rise of right-wing populist movements in Germany (AfD), Austria (FPO), France (LePen), Britain (Brexit) and Italy (Salvini).

However, anti-elitism may be neither necessary nor sufficient for populism to function.⁵⁶ Once populists acquire power and become the new ‘elite’ themselves, anti-elitism wanes and the movement may survive on the tribal allegiances and moral fervour of its followers alone.⁵⁷

Populist Narratives

Creating a narrative that offers tribal comforts, caters to cognitive limits and channels emotions is fundamental to the attraction of populism.⁵⁸ It seems that support for populism is a cultural as much as an economic phenomenon. Trump did deliver culturally and psychologically, giving Americans who had felt ignored and disrespected the feeling that they mattered. The emotional politics of identity trumped the rational politics of social and economic interest.⁵⁹

Populist narratives often emphasise a narcissistic sense of unrecognised greatness and betrayal by adversaries, and a life-and-death struggle for justice and recognition.⁶⁰ They typically define their ingroup as inherently virtuous.⁶¹ Rectifying grievances and nostalgia for an idealised past (e.g. ‘Make America Great Again’, ‘Take Back Control’) are also common narrative features.

Populist narratives often generate support by employing *utopian* and *messianic ideation*, promising a perfect future that justifies every sacrifice and gives meaning and significance to followers. Promising a ‘thousand year empire’ (nazism) or a communist utopia (marxism) has a powerful appeal, producing strong social bonding. Liberal or conservative incrementalist ideologies have great trouble competing with the allure of the messianic message. As Roger Scruton observed, the liberal commitment to gradual improvements over time lacks

the emotional appeal of dramatic populist promises. Populism taps into the all-too-human but utopian quest for perfect happiness. An impatience with rules and processes (e.g. Trump's angry promises to 'just get things done') and disdain for complicated democratic systems is a hallmark of the populist approach prone to making impossible promises.

Another particularly perverse narrative strategy is the populist 'big lie': the more implausible and audacious some lies are, the less followers assume that it could possibly have been invented. 'Big lies' often linked to conspiracy theories are so common in human history that they suggest the human propensity to believe in outlandish narratives may even have some adaptive value. The more outrageous the story the more effective it appears in bonding together an identity group.⁶² Many religions, cults, conspiracy theories and myths are so extraordinary that their very implausibility may inhibit skepticism. Human history abounds in successful 'big lies'. Trump's claim to have won the 2020 US presidential election is a recent striking example.

Conspiracy narratives are common in populist movements, offering a sense of privileged knowledge and significance to believers and helping to explain away facts that challenge moral certainty.⁶³ The marxist notion of 'false consciousness' is a good example, blaming bourgeois brainwashing to explain why many 'proletars' fail to identify with their assigned class and revolutionary destiny. Conspiracy theories endure because the conspirators necessarily work in secrecy, so facts are not publicly available.

The remarkable endurance of theories about Jewish conspiracies is a good example, recently re-activated by Hungary's Orban accusing George Soros of heading a financiers' conspiracy to manipulate the EU and subjugate Hungary.⁶⁴ Woke left-wing populists even see science as a patriarchal conspiracy to serve reactionary interests, privileging white men and disempowering other 'knowledges'. Woke populists also see conspiracies behind incontrovertible genetic evidence for the heritability of human qualities that challenge their social engineering objectives.⁶⁵

Charismatic Leadership

Leaders offer personal focus to populist movements, and leaderless movements rarely persist irrespective of their cause.⁶⁶ Successful populist leaders are often charismatic, exude self-confidence and certainty, and are unwilling to tolerate disagreement. The more politically extreme the group, the more likely that the leader exhibits these qualities.⁶⁷ Populist leaders typically function as the symbolic embodiment of their cause, monopolise autocratic power and act as the ultimate arbiter of the group.

Given the psychological needs of followers, populist leaders must be consistent, persistent and uncompromising.⁶⁸ The emphasis on certainty and simplicity is expressed in language styles, as populist leaders often use controlling and even militaristic language that is explicit, clear, and efficient. Repetition is another key tactic: the same message repeated continually — with conviction and no retraction — is a technique refined by the master propagandist Goebbels, and effectively employed by the likes of Trump, Orban and others.⁶⁹ Psychological research confirms that repetition increases message credibility almost as much as hearing the same message from several independent sources.

Another fascinating feature of populist leadership is an endemic disrespect for the truth. As reality is complex but followers demand certainty and simplicity, leaders inevitably lie. As discussed above, ‘big lies’ are often persuasive because of their very audacity. In fascist and marxist dictatorships, truth is always secondary to propaganda, and obvious lies remain unchallenged for decades. Trump told countless untruths, without any serious consequences. It seems that the press took Trump “literally but not seriously”. In contrast, his supporters took him “seriously, but not literally”.⁷⁰ It is the invocation of moral absolutism and certainty that allows populist leaders to ignore normal standards of honesty and suffer no censure when dishonesty is uncovered,⁷¹ unlike mainstream leaders who generally suffer serious consequences when caught. In a sense, populist leaders must cater to the psychological needs of their followers, and so personally embody the absurdities and fallacies of their movements.

Summary and Conclusions

Populist movements represent a serious challenge to the foundational values of liberal democracies, built on the Enlightenment principles of individualism, humanism, tolerance and freedom. How can we explain the surprising attraction of populist tribal ideologies in liberal democracies, the most successful form of civilisation yet in human history? This paper argues that populism succeeds because it has a deep affinity with the archaic stone-age characteristics of the human mind, evolved to serve the demands of group cooperation and cohesion rather than the dispassionate discovery of truth.⁷² Political movements succeed or fail depending on their ability to mobilise basic psychological needs, and in this paper we surveyed some of the psychological features that both left-wing and right-wing populism exploit.

The basic argument is that populism, a stone-age tribal credo, appeals to our ancient psychological predispositions by offering positive identity, epistemic certainty, simplicity, belonging and significance.⁷³ Evolutionary and cognitive psychology now strongly suggest that humans, relying on group cooperation and cohesion for survival, are highly predisposed to embrace fictitious symbolic narratives as a means of enhancing group integration. Classical and more recent populist movements such as marxism, fascism, cancel culture, Antifa, and woke-ism are explicitly designed to exploit these evolutionary vulnerabilities.

The possibility that ‘human nature’ as shaped by evolutionary adaptation is ill-suited to the psychological requirements of liberal

democracies (assuming independence, tolerance and rational decisions) echoes Plato's age-old concerns and may at first appear threatening. However, we may be encouraged by the fact that for some hundreds of years now, liberal democracies survived despite our underlying paleolithic inclinations.

It is also possible that the strident individualism and secularism of our age, and the disappearance of genuine primary group experiences from our lives, have left people particularly vulnerable to the siren calls of tribal ideologies. The explosive growth of the internet and social media probably also contributed to undermining the once dominant public voice of enlightened liberalism. Technology has facilitated the ability of people seduced by populism to find their own 'tribe' in minutes, promoting the spread of fake news, conspiracy theories and sectional group ideologies.

How can we best respond to the populist challenge? Rational argument has limited utility in convincing 'true believers' who reject the value of discussion, and are absolutely convinced of their righteousness. The march of a minority of committed totalitarian ideologues through our institutions (universities, media, law, education, public service, corporations) is only possible if the silent majority remains silent. Becoming aware of what populism represents and how it operates could be the first step towards standing up to populist demands. In the past, liberal democracies withstood serious internal and external challenges and defeated both fascism and communism. Perhaps new external threats like the rise of Chinese authoritarianism may yet produce a similarly determined response?

In a sense what we are seeing now is the return of tribal thinking to political centre stage. There is good evidence that threatened group identity promotes populist voting in a number of countries, including the USA, Britain, Poland and others.⁷⁴ Populist ideology and practices now represent a serious and lasting internal threat to liberal democracies. In combating this danger, we need a more thorough understanding of the psychological processes that underlie populist support.

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The Psychology of Populism: Tribal Challenges to Liberal Democracy

The resurgence of both left-wing and right-wing populism presents a serious challenge for liberal democracies. Whereas liberal democracy is based on the Enlightenment principles of individualism, tolerance and freedom, populism is a fundamentally collectivist, anti-individualist and anti-Enlightenment tribal ideology.

This paper goes beyond economic and other explanations for the resurgence of populism to provide a much fuller psychological account — indeed, a warning — of how populism appeals to our age-old tribal instincts formed in the ancient past when group cohesion was the key to evolutionary success. What is necessary for populism to flourish is a persuasive psychological narrative that mobilises these deep-seated psychological characteristics and turns them into a potent political force.

The paper explores how populist movements cater to the evolutionary propensity of people to seek positive group identity, moral absolutism, simplicity and epistemic certainty. The strategies employed by populist narratives and leaders to satisfy the psychological expectations of their followers is then discussed. It concludes by arguing that a better understanding of the psychological mechanisms that populist movements exploit is therefore essential if the threat to liberal democracy is to be contained.



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He was a political refugee from communism and migrated to Australia from Hungary at the age of 22, studied psychology at Macquarie University, and obtained his doctorate at the University of Oxford. For a brief video of his formative experiences, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0PS7r2p2_ec.

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