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The Populist Challenge to Political Legitimacy: A Crisis of Social Validation

Populistyczne wyzwanie dla legitymizacji politycznej: kryzys uprawomocnienia

Summary

This article argues that the challenges to political legitimacy currently encountered by liberal democracies affected by populist anti-centrism imply a crisis of theoretical understanding. This is because the competing claims made by recent and contemporary political thinkers reflect common underlying assumptions that put them radically at odds with the perspectives of at least some of those now embracing political populism. As a consequence, the latter find themselves excluded from any justifications for preferring certain sorts of political institution – such as liberal-democratic ones – over others.

Keywords: Populism, anti-centrism, political legitimation, social validation, normativism, realism

Streszczenie

Artykuł argumentuje, że wyzwania dla legitymizacji politycznej, z którymi mierzą się obecnie liberalne demokracje dotknięte populistycznym anty-centryzmem, pociągają za sobą kryzys w teorii politycznej. Wynika to stąd, że rywalizujące ze sobą twierdzenia współczesnych myślicieli politycznych odwołują się do wspólnych założeń, które stoją w radykalnym konflikcie z punktami widzenia przynajmniej niektórych dzisiejszych zwolenników populizmu politycznego. W konsekwencji ci ostatni nie mogą utożsamić się z żadnymi uzasadnieniami na rzecz preferowania pewnych rodzajów instytucji politycznych, np. liberalno-demokratycznych.

Słowa kluczowe: populizm, anty-centryzm, legitymizacja polityczna, uprawomocnienie społeczne, normatywizm, realizm

0. Introduction

One of the most perplexing features of the political developments occurring in the early 21st century is the set of challenges facing liberal democracies affected by populist anti-centrism.[1] To the extent that these threaten representative democracy, constitutionality, and the separation of powers, they can be taken to constitute a significant challenge to mainstream forms of political legitimacy. This article proposes an analysis of that challenge from a standpoint that aims to be neutral, or at least non-judgemental, with respect to the motivations and concerns driving populism itself. In so doing, it aims to also shed light on some enduring issues connected with political legitimacy, and to spell out some potential implications of recent and current developments for philosophical theorizing about politics.

My approach is that of a theoretical outsider, inasmuch as it seeks to put in question certain underlying assumptions that tend to define the terms of much of the theoretical discourse that informs politics today, rather than advocating any particular stance within that discourse. It may also be understood as having a therapeutic goal: that of bringing about a heightened recognition of differences of perspective without subordinating these to any overarching evaluative point of view.[2]

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[1] I take the term "populism" to refer, in its most common usage, to any currents in society, of whatever ostensible political persuasion, that are distinguished by their hostility and/or suspicion towards established social, cultural, political and/or institutional elites. Of course one can construct, and argue for or against the value of, various more precisely specified definitions, but this relatively minimalistic one will suffice for my purposes here.

[2] The term "therapeutic" is employed here to refer to two distinct but related things. Firstly, the approach or method associated with Wittgenstein's later philosophy, and secondly the idea of someone seeking to mediate between two parties in a relationship who, though, wedded together by brute facts pertaining to their common existence, lack mutual understanding. Since I hold that the value and point of the former emerg-

I should offer two important caveats straightaway. Firstly, although the challenge to mainstream forms of political legitimacy under analysis will be presented as a crisis of legitimation primarily affecting liberal democracies, from my viewpoint this is only a historically contingent feature. That is to say, it just reflects the fact that these happen to be the prevailing currently established forms of political legitimacy in those parts of the world affected by the developments in question. It does not, as far as I am concerned, reflect any overarching historical destiny or telos.[3] Secondly, the forms of populist anti-centrism that I am concerned with are just those manifested in "developed" societies that have not undergone a transition from communism. Hence, the emergence of populism in former Eastern-bloc European countries such as Poland and Hungary should only be regarded as falling under the scope of the present discussion to the extent that it can be regarded as reflecting observably similar trends to those witnessed in countries such as the UK, the USA, and other comparable parts of the "developed" world.

The present article falls into three main sections. The first considers the concept of political legitimacy from a theoretical standpoint largely external to current debates in political philosophy, construing forms of political legitimation as a subset of a wider phenomenon: namely, *forms of social val-*

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es in specific contexts rather than as a theoretical stance, I shall not seek to explicate it systematically here.

[3] One could thus imagine a counterfactual scenario in which authoritarian forms of political governance had become the norm (amongst "advanced" societies), and where an equivalent set of challenges would then have emerged, for which the points made here would, I think, be equally valid – though in a kind of mirror-image form as regards their relationship to liberalism as a political doctrine. Of course, some fairly radical terminological revisions would have to be made to express this, given that phrases such as "populist anti-centrism" and "advanced" might then possess a different historically located meaning, but such a reassignment of meanings does not seem to me to be utterly inconceivable.

idation. On this reading, advocating some particular form of political legitimation requires that one first identify what is distinctive about it as a way of validating human behaviour and decision-making. An important subsidiary point is that this frequently involves asserting or denying its self-standing character as such a mode of validation – something that in turn raises questions about the terms in which one should do this. (For example, if one wishes to affirm representative democracy, then one presumably holds this to be a distinctively political way in which decisions come to be validated for a given society. I cannot see how one could express one's preference for that system without either holding that representative democracy is self-validating as a collective decision-making procedure or believing that it acquires its validity from elsewhere – e.g. from the decisions that typically emerge from it, evaluated according to some non-procedural criteria, such as their utility. The former approach invests a self-standing positive significance in the democratic procedure itself, making it a self-standing form of validation, while the latter does not.) My main thesis here will be that no matter whether we take such forms of political validation to be self-standing or not, the principal established positions on how they are to be understood converge on a shared underlying position with respect to one issue: how they relate to practicality as a feature of human life.[4] Unfortunately, the question that in many instances accompanies this, of the sort of terms in which validation should be construed as being or not being self-standing, is

[4] The term "practicality" should be understood throughout as implying some form of future-orientedness on the part of human beings in their role as agents, but not in the political sense of a concern for a utopian telos. I just have in mind what is implicit in ordinary instances of goal-oriented action, both at the level of practical reasoning and action-explanation, and in terms of the phenomenology of everyday practical life. All references to futurity occurring later in the article should be interpreted in this way.

too complex to be systematically addressed here. However, for the sake of preserving the integrity of my neutral and therapeutically oriented stance, I am obliged to make some brief references to this issue, just to close off in advance some unwarranted assumptions about what that stance involves that may otherwise be made.

The second section proposes a reading of current political developments. According to this reading, the widespread observable rise of populist forms of anti-centrism is taken to express disillusionment and detachment on the part of citizens not just with liberal-democratic institutions, but also with the realm of political concerns and processes more generally. I interpret this as calling into question, in a specific sort of way, the shared position on practicality highlighted as a feature of traditional approaches to political matters in the first section. Here I should add that I approach this subject as a philosopher rather than a political scientist, so the focus will be on the steps leading from just a rough and ready characterization of the relevant socio-political facts to certain more philosophical conclusions. No attempt is made to offer an in-depth or systematic assessment of how those facts themselves stack up from a socio-empirical perspective.

Readers are, of course, free to judge for themselves the accuracy of my characterization of the facts. My intention here is not to endorse or condemn any forms of political populism, be they anti-centrist or not. It is rather to present an understanding of how things look when seen from the standpoint of a certain distinctive segment of those who have supported populist figures and movements in recent times. What defines the groups that make up this segment are, in my view, two closely related and overlapping perspectives on the practical significance of political matters, which I take to pose a quite special challenge for contemporary political theorising. How prevalent this segment happens to be is, in my view, less significant than the fact that it poses that challenge – one that might well grow

in importance, or simply vanish, or disappear and re-emerge from other sources, in the future.

The third section presents my reasons for doubting whether contemporary political philosophy is equipped to address that challenge as it stands. I adopt an unashamedly broad-brush approach at this point. This is partly for reasons of space, but also because it seems that the basis for such a negative diagnosis can be captured just by getting clear about a fundamental point of convergence in the principal competing strands of political thinking on offer today. Once this has been acknowledged, we just see quite plainly that there is no way in which such strands could ever hope to properly accommodate the challenge posed by the particular populist perspective I seek to draw attention to.

1. Political legitimation and the minimal practicalist premise

Human beings typically organize themselves into social collectivities that impose standards of behaviour of one sort or another, and it seems reasonable – at least in the context of social philosophy, broadly construed – to wonder how, in particular cases, this works. For a given sort of society or societal unit, we can ask about how certain kinds of behaviour come to be evaluated as more or less in line with the expectations of the group in question, and about how such standards are determined.[5] We quickly discover that forms of behaviour are evaluated on the basis of a variety of different sorts of consideration (conventional, instrumental, ethical, aesthetic, ritualistic, symbolic, etc.), which we can think of as giving rise, individually or in

[5] While it may appear that we can also classify such forms of behaviour without reference to standards of evaluation (as just belonging to distinct domains, such as the political, private, cultural, scientific, economic, and so on), it is not clear to me that such classifications, taken by themselves, are genuinely revealing of anything in human society.

combination, to distinct classes or forms of *social validation*. The concept of "political legitimation" (together with its cognates, e.g. "political legitimacy") is commonly used to pick out precisely one such form or class, which is generally taken to concern matters of collective governance.

As I have mentioned already, one issue that sometimes crops up in discussions of what significance we should invest in such forms of validation is whether they are validatory in a self-standing way (i.e. self-validating), or in terms that derive from some other validatory source (i.e. externally validated). This notion of "self-standingness" will show up at a few points in my consideration of the underlying position that I take to be shared by different accounts of political legitimation – a position that, as I mentioned earlier, takes a certain view about how they relate to practicality as a feature of human life. Before proceeding further, I therefore wish to first clarify some points relating to my use of this notion.

I intend the term "self-standing" to function as a placeholder, whose role is to keep open the controversial issue of the sort of terms in which an account of the self-standing or non-self-standing status of political forms of validation ought ultimately to be framed. Some philosophers and theorists construe this status to be a function of how such forms of validation stand relative to a broader realm of self-constituting social normativity.[6] Others, though, take it to be a function of how they stand relative to facts about what is essentially entailed by the nature of human beings and/or their surroundings, viewed from a position involving some sort of commitment to metaphysical realism.[7] (While the contrasting implications for issues central

[6] For example, a social realm that gives rise to institutional facts, deontic powers, and so on, that while socially constructed are taken to count as real for participating members. See J. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, The Free Press, New York 1995, especially p. 31–58.

[7] For present purposes I simply rule out a third option, which is to regard such issues as explanatorily reducible to facts about nomic regular-

to political philosophy are far-reaching, my overall purposes here require me to adopt a neutral stance on this point, while still registering certain possible differences of perspective that may emerge in connection with this.)

We can see that this issue is by no means trivial from the fact that in our day the question of whether political forms of validation should be regarded as self-standing or not is often explored in terms that just take it for granted that political matters form a subclass of a larger set of rule-based practices or institutions. This can make it appear that the question of whether they are self-standing or not *just is* one of whether the *rules* of a given society are invested with constitutive significance for members of that society, or are to be seen as merely regulating aspects of social behaviour that would have existed and possessed the greater part of their significance anyway. On that overall approach, it is precisely the *rule-based* character of social practices and institutions more generally that will be affirmed or denied as a self-standing feature, and political modes of validation will tend to just automatically inherit this status, at least as it relates to some particular domain of concern.[8] Yet this makes it harder to arrive at an acknowledgement of the sort of common underlying commitment about how political matters relate to practicality as a feature of human life that I wish to highlight, as one is then expected to show how

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ities of human behaviour, disclosed in terms consistent with the hypothetico-deductive methods of the natural sciences. This is because my commitment to an evaluatively neutral, therapeutically oriented stance conflicts with philosophical naturalism of the sort that I take to be presupposed by that methodology when applied to human social affairs. I take such naturalism to amount to a position on philosophical matters that is dogmatic, and about which I am therefore obliged to remain agnostic.

[8] Thus, for example, we might see democracy as simply a logical extension to the realm of governance of principles of impartiality and fairness, and freedom of choice, operative in society (human relations) at large, and then proceed to either affirm these principles as a self-standing source of validation for human social behaviour, or seek to derive them from other putatively more basic facts about human beings and their reality.

this feature is built into society at large, conceived specifically as a set of rule-governed institutions, rather than just its specifically political forms of validation, conceived in a more open-ended way.

One reason for thinking that such an expectation is unreasonable is that it presupposes, in an indirect sort of way, a prior resolution of the question of the terms in which issues of "self-standingness" in respect of forms of social validation are to be construed. This is because while such a resolution does not directly entail a social constructionist approach, it still does tend to lead to it, in that the obvious alternative, which involves explicating such rules as expressions of natural law,[9] has its roots in a theological tradition that would now tend to be seen as dogmatically metaphysical. Yet the resulting impression, which is that it has somehow been established that there is no plausible non-theological and non-dogmatic alternative to such an anti-essentialist social constructionist stance on these issues, is surely misleading. It simply reflects a prior theoretical commitment concerning the role that rules themselves ought to play in our attempts to make sense of political forms of validation. If one remains open-minded about that issue, then there is no *prima facie* reason to dismiss accounts of the self-standing or non-self-standing character of political forms of validation that seek to settle that issue by appealing directly to facts about human nature in terms that imply a commitment to metaphysical realism.[10] Hence my stance as

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[9] I.e. metaphysical correlates of rule-like regularities.

[10] Of course, this is not the same as furnishing positive reasons for accepting such an account. My point is simply that in contrast to the contemporary consensus in political philosophy such a theoretical option remains in play as a possibility. For arguments that imply that such an option cannot be ruled out on a priori modality-related grounds, see K. Fine, "Essence and Modality", *Philosophical Perspectives* 8 (1994), p. 1–16. For an account suggesting that modern-era political thinkers who claim to operate without reference to metaphysical commitments regarding human nature (e.g. Hume, Kant, the Frankfurt School) in fact depend on

regards the terms in which matters of self-standingness and non-self-standingness are to be construed is one that is neutral between two plausible options, rather than between one plausible and one implausible one. Having made this important preliminary point, I am now ready to proceed to my thesis.

At the centre of Western political thought lies a debate about who we should take to be legitimately vested with the power to make decisions affecting others, or on behalf of others, and why: i.e. the question of the proper form of *governance* in human affairs. I claim that the main currents in philosophical thinking that have shaped our political awareness of this issue share a common feature. This is a commitment to thinking of reality as fundamentally constituted in a way that is compatible, at least to some minimally non-trivial extent, with the practical pursuit by human beings of human "goods" (i.e. whatever counts as "good"). I shall refer to this as the *minimal practicalist premise*.[11] It seems to me that this commitment comes into play when thinkers affirm some particular form of political legitimation with respect to matters of governance (e.g. democracy or autocracy). It also seems to me that how it does so reflects, in at least some cases, a definite view about

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these for the plausibility of their own views (about human agency and autonomy), see R. Groff, *Ontology Revisited: Metaphysics in Social and Political Philosophy*, Routledge, London and New York 2013. For broader conceptual analysis of the idea of metaphysically grounded agential powers as it relates to issues in the philosophy of modality, see B. Vetter, *Potentiality: From Dispositions to Modality*, OUP, Oxford 2015. On the other hand, extending the scope of applicability of notions of essentialist grounding from traditional metaphysics to areas regarded as intrinsically evaluative raises a host of other questions. See, e.g., S. Berker, "The Unity of Grounding", *Mind* (forthcoming).

[11] In characterizing this as minimal, what I mean is that it embodies a minimal commitment to practicality as a significant feature of human life, by committing us to thinking of reality in terms that are not permitted to completely rule out all non-trivial possibilities for the practical pursuit of such goods. Hence amongst other things it excludes causal determinism.

the self-standing or non-self-standing character of such modes of legitimation or validation themselves.[12]

Ancient philosophers, for example, regarded the question of the proper form of governance in human affairs as a question pertaining to the internal structural relations of a society conceived as an integral unity. Taking the two most notable examples as representative, they conceived of it that way either on the basis of how it stood relative to some supposedly timeless metaphysical ideals (Plato), or on the basis of a social-evolutionary account of how smaller groupings evolve towards larger integral entities not just to meet the demands associated with practical survival, but also to create enhanced possibilities for the fulfilment of an ethical telos implied in a general way by human nature, and possibly in more particular terms by a given culture (Aristotle).[13] In both of the cases just mentioned, issues of who should rule or be ruled are settled by referring us to what count as more intuitively natural instances of the same issue arising – as when Plato appeals to the desirability of non-rational parts of a person's psyche (will, appetite) being ruled by their rational part (intellect), or Aristotle appeals to natural relations of dependence underlying

[12] In unfolding this thesis I take myself to be pointing to something obvious. The problem is that it is something whose significance we may become blind to, in certain circumstances, *because of* its sheer obviousness. Hence, acceptance of the thesis will not be something we arrive at simply through argumentation from already accepted premises to a conclusion that is not so. My approach here is influenced by the later Wittgenstein.

[13] How far Aristotle's thinking about ethics and politics should be regarded as turning on his metaphysical account of human nature, or as more of a hermeneutic unfolding of the presuppositions of a particular social culture, remains contested. There is no space to explore this here – hence my somewhat open-ended characterization. (I think it makes more sense to favour the former view, providing one is prepared, as I am, to think of his metaphysics as itself already embodying, in important ways, a value-involving comprehension of reality, but not otherwise.)

master-slave relations.[14] If we try to imagine what such a line of argument would amount to in the absence of the minimal practicalist premise mentioned earlier, we just find that it loses all sense. The notion of governance, at least insofar as it is tied to the interest that the issues surrounding it hold for us, presupposes a space of possibilities for meaningful action, since any difference between good governance and bad governance ultimately comes down to a difference manifested in good or bad practical decision-making and acting.

The strategy here, of defending locating decision-making authority in one part of a society rather than another by drawing analogies with similar cases at the level of smaller social groupings, particular social relations, or internal relationships between parts of the human psyche, where these are taken to be intuitively natural and obviously correct, involves a definite commitment to the self-standingness of the political as a mode of validation. This is because what is at stake in these cases, too, is ultimately political, as it is essentially also a matter of fulfilling the conditions for good rather than bad governance, including self-governance. Ignoring this feature would make it harder to pin down the level at which the minimal practicalist premise comes into play, as one can no longer then be clear as to whether the proper basic-level characterization of governance captures its distinctively political character or not. (For

[14] Such "analogies of power", moreover, persisted as a major reference point for the justification and critique of particular models of political life well into the early-modern period. We can see this from the fact that the primary target of Locke's polemic against Sir Robert Filmer in his *First Treatise on Government* is the latter's argument equating, in biblical terms, kinghood with fatherhood. The analogy is not dismissed outright by Locke, but rather is countered by offering an alternative model of familial authority as a supposedly more factually correct basis for determining, analogically, the natural and correct form that political authority should take. See J. Locke, *Two Treatises on Government*, various editions, first published in 1689. See also J.S. Maloy, "The Aristotelianism of Locke's Politics", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70/2 (2009), p. 235–257.

example, it might be argued that what we really care about is just a certain psychological ideal of harmonious balance that happens to be expressively manifested *inter alia* in political decision making, and which we value in aesthetically contemplative terms for its own sake. Governance construed as consisting precisely in such decision making would not then be essential to that ideal's manifestation, and so neither would be the internal connection between it and practicality.)

Turning to a philosopher as central to modern political thought as Kant, we encounter a similar situation. Kant's conception of ethics as strictly deontological, combined with his preference for envisioning political solutions to human problems at the level of their implications for universal humanity, is framed in terms of regulative ideals. Given the deontological form that ethics takes for Kant (i.e. maxims/imperatives, rather than any putative grounding in statements of fact), such ideals must be action-guiding in discernible ways if they are to be capable of being observably manifested at all. Such action-guidingness would itself just become incomprehensible, in the absence of a space of non-trivial possibilities for action and related decision-making.[15]

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[15] Where Kant is concerned, any basis for distinguishing between what counts as rational, what counts as rational and ethical, and what counts as rational, ethical and political, seems likely to be contentious. This makes the question of whether or not he regards political forms of legitimacy pertaining to governance as self-standing forms of validation quite intractable. Nevertheless, there is an issue here that runs parallel to that which my invoking of that distinction elsewhere is intended to address. If, as in pragmatism and a great deal of phenomenology, a commitment to some kind of broadly Kantian epistemology is interpreted as carrying similar implications for our understanding of reality to the practical premise itself, then the latter will inevitably seem redundant. But the thought that *circumstances* could render what it means to subscribe to that premise problematic will then appear incomprehensible, as this would seem to amount to thinking that such circumstances could render one's underlying epistemological framework problematic too. My view is that this point can only be addressed by highlighting the broader, an-

The same point also holds for the broad strand of thinking that treats political legitimation as legitimized instrumentally in terms of the self-interest of individuals or groups.[16] Here the minimal practicalist premise enters in the form of the belief that there are, typically, significant strategic (cost-benefit) calculations to be made in human life about how best to accomplish one's goals. A pure form of this kind of position on political matters will hold that these calculations alone suffice to motivate embracing some preferred model of political legitimation with respect to matters of governance, implying that were all such calculations to be robbed of their importance, then the need for any governance, political institutions, etc., would itself be reduced to zero. (So political choices are taken to express a mode of validation not inherently concerned with matters of governance, and what makes this mode of validation distinctively political is not a self-standing feature, but entirely a function of other concerns. Hence, where advocates of such an approach are concerned, we should expect the minimal practicalist premise to likewise manifest itself primarily at the level of these other concerns.)

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ti-dogmatic reasons for not embracing Kantian epistemology that have emerged in 20th century philosophy, especially in connection with Wittgenstein. See O. Kuusela, *The Struggle against Dogmatism: Wittgenstein and the Concept of Philosophy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2008.

[16] Some of the best-known social-contract theories (e.g. Hobbes, Locke) will certainly fall into this category, as will those evolutionary accounts of political institutions (e.g. Hume) that focus on the latter's role in balancing, and maintaining a pragmatic compromise between, the conflicting needs and aspirations that human beings are naturally inclined to have. Of course there is a close connection here with utilitarianism about ethics, and to the game-theoretical analysis of human behaviour generally. See D. Lewis, *Convention*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1969. I shall pass over the possible religiously motivated grounds for holding such a conception, as in Locke's Protestant redemptivism. For discussion of the latter, see: J. Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke*, CUP, Cambridge 1969, p. 87–95.

One final point worth making at this stage is that how we conceive of the practicality of human life tends to be closely bound up with our preferred conception of how ethical concerns figure in the latter. Yet the extent to which this is so is surely dependent on how far we are prepared to go in construing ethical value itself in fundamentally practical terms. It seems that one may conceive of it quite narrowly, as just a matter of determining right or wrong modes of action in situations where it is assumed that some sort of capacity to choose and exercise moral responsibility is in play, or more broadly, with reference to some more reflectively (and possibly aesthetically) evaluative stance adopted towards human life both in its practical and in its non-practical aspects.[17] In the latter case, the conception of human life as a practical venture will be vindicated by how it figures relative to that reflective evaluation.

2. The significance of the contemporary populist challenge

In this section, I shall present some implications of the challenge posed by contemporary populism to liberal democracy which have not, in my view, so far been adequately recognized by political theorists. My main thesis is that seen from a per-

[17] See R. Geuss, "Outside Ethics", *European Journal of Philosophy* 11/1 (2003), p. 29–53. Geuss's account highlights both how far ethics has normally been understood in such narrowly practicalist terms, as focused on instances of practical-ethical decision making, and the reasons for thinking that some modern German-language philosophers (Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Adorno and Heidegger) stand in a more complex and ambivalent relation to that. For a defence of the idea that ethical evaluation should be modelled more on aesthetic evaluation than on practical-ethical decision-making construed as a simple matter of weighing up options for action, see: M. Tanner, "Examples in Moral Philosophy", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 65/1 (1965), p. 61–76. For further discussion, see also A. Bergqvist, "Thick Description Revisited: Tanner on Thick Concepts and Perspectivalism in Value Philosophy", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Virtual Issue No. 3 (2016), p. 202–215.

spective internal to at least some forms of contemporary populism, its supporters are faced with circumstances that put in question the minimalist practicalist premise underpinning existing political philosophies.[18]

The partial evacuation of the political centre-ground that corresponds to the current rise of populism in otherwise predominantly liberal-democratic societies suggests that a significant number of previously politically engaged citizens are giving up on, or at least becoming emotionally and intellectually detached from, the established norms, institutions and processes of political legitimation operative in their societies.[19] It also seems plausible that in many cases this is because, as things stand, they see no practically coherent way of moving forwards with their lives, interests, etc., within the existing framework for social action.[20] However, if it is the case that

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[18] Two thinkers whose ideas about politics are arguably left untouched by this problematization are Schopenhauer and Benjamin, neither of whom can properly be thought of as accepting the practicalist premise (though for very different reasons in each case). How their approaches stand in relation to the issues discussed here is something I shall pass over due to lack of space. Neither thinker, however, has exercised a significant influence on mainstream political theorising, unless one regards the partial (and somewhat problematic) assimilation of Benjamin's ideas by the Frankfurt School as a case in point.

[19] This need not necessarily manifest itself in voting for a populist candidate. It may be expressed in a decision not to vote at all. In many cases, the success of anti-centrist politicians seems to be as much a function of low or suppressed voter turnout as it is of their ability to win votes, and they may set out just to win over certain strategically significant classes of voter to not voting. This last feature is especially salient in the USA, but may not hold for former Eastern-block European countries such as Poland.

[20] There seems to be wide agreement that the shift from the mere holding of a personal attitude to active support of a populist political agenda has been encouraged by two factors. The first is the fact that a growing part of the electorate have come to see themselves as competent to engage with political decision-making without deferring to elites. The second is the fact that the greatly expanded strata of the lower-middle and middle-middle classes now find themselves subject to a worsening of

individuals or groups who understand themselves on a deep level as practical agents have concluded that the normative framework within which they were expecting to operate is no longer functionally relevant to their needs, and so have sought to step outside of it, then we would ordinarily also expect to see evidence of them seeking to accomplish the logical next step implied by a practicalist conception of human life: namely, the positing and constructing of some viable alternative framework for coherent practical decision-making and action. The point of departure for my analysis is that for a significant portion of those lending support to populist figureheads and causes, this is not what we are witnessing.

Firstly, many such people opt to maintain some sort of ideological status quo in their lives. That is to say, they display a reluctance to question many of the social and political values they are familiar with, even while regarding the institutions that embody them as politically ineffectual or corrupt.[21] They carry on thinking of themselves in aspirational terms, as individuals seeking to live their lives in ways that involve exercising agency – i.e. in essentially practical terms. However, they simultaneously consider themselves to be systematically frustrated in their pursuit of their goals by the lack of what they would consider an appropriately empowering socio-political framework.

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socio-economic conditions whose underlying causes seem set to endure. At the same time, it seems fair to assert that no realistic long-term vision of how their concerns might be met is currently being offered by politicians of any stripe.

[21] This might seem to conflict with the idea that populists, in voting for non-centrist candidates or parties, or abstaining from a strategic vote that would amount to choosing between centrist parties, are rejecting the political status quo. My point is that such acts amount to an endorsement of the idea of hoping for change (typically expressed in slogans or vague promises), not any realistic and substantial positive *program* for change. Again, this point may not apply so much to ex-communist countries like Poland as it does to the UK or the USA.

Secondly, many such people attach more importance than before to actions and gestures in the public sphere that are essentially symbolic and expressive rather than practical. Some of these may carry no particular political message, but in other cases they do, and it seems to me that populists are especially drawn to those that can be read as conveying a particular subtext. That subtext affirms their right to act on a practical agenda defined from a perspective unique to their own situation, potentially at the expense of others.[22] In other words, people who hold themselves to be irreversibly embroiled in circumstances in which, as they see it, *their own* agency has been rendered powerless by society when it comes to achieving any concrete improvement to *their own* lives, continue to endorse the importance of agency to those lives, but have shifted – in terms of the context for this endorsement – into a realm that is both more symbolic and more exclusionary in terms of the interests that inform it.

What I have just described corresponds, I think, fairly well – at least at the time of writing – to the strongly identitarian forms of political populism visible on both sides of the US political scene, in the various shades of radical Brexit-related sentiment in the UK, and elsewhere. In these cases and others, political figures have proved able to form links with a passive and disengaged electorate through being seen to acknowledge, in ways that the liberal-democratic centre apparently does not, the perspectives of those who feel left behind by the direction their society has taken, and who have come to see themselves as unfairly distanced from its centres of power and influence.

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[22] Ethno-nationalists of various stripes furnish the most visible instance of this, but a surprisingly wide variety of other political and cultural trends tend to involve the same pattern of self-understanding, albeit only partially and in more subtle ways.

Amongst political theorists working to understand populism in its various recent and contemporary manifestations, there exists a major divergence of opinion. One influential approach focuses on the ways in which populism can be seen as promoting popular majoritarianism at the expense of the enshrining of universal human rights in a procedural framework differentiating liberal from non-liberal democracies. In this context it can be helpful to characterize populism as a "thin ideology", capable of attaching itself to a variety of "thick" host ideologies (of the left or the right, or possibly the centre, if one accepts the seemingly paradoxical possibility of "populist anti-populism").[23] Another approach, certainly more influential in hard-left intellectual circles (but arguably just as apt for expressing a hard-right standpoint), sees populism as just manifesting in a more explicit and pronounced way – at the level of political style or discourse – what is actually the true nature of political life anyway. This pertains to its agonistic character, which is thought to entail that groups in society will inevitably find themselves at odds with one another, and so be driven to activate themselves politically, once they realize that their fundamental interests are threatened by some conjunction of circumstances and the hegemonic forces supposedly operative within human society.[24] However, both approaches converge on the thought that what distinguishes populist political tendencies from others is a function of their capacity to *mobilize* members of the populace. What interests me here is how this concept of mobilization should be understood if it is to make genuine sense of the complexity of populist politics as we are experiencing it today, independently of which of the above approaches one might happen to favour. (Those two approach-

[23] See C. Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist", *Government and Opposition* 39/4 (2004), p. 541–563. See also C. Mudde and C.R. Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, OUP, Oxford 2017.

[24] See E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso, London 1985.

es tend to align loosely with contrasting sets of political priorities, but since I am essentially agnostic about these, remaining neutral on such matters is an option – at least for me.)

The concept of populist mobilization expresses the idea that what we are witnessing is a changed or renewed form of practical engagement on the part of citizens with politics. The basic thought seems to be that citizens who would otherwise not be politically engaged, in that they have come to view attempts to pursue their goals via the more institutionally regulated mechanisms and procedures of liberal democracy as having been systematically frustrated by elites, seek an alternative form of empowerment. They then come to believe, rightly or wrongly, that such an alternative has presented itself, in the form of a more direct means of securing recognition of their priorities within the political arena, where such recognition will in turn exercise an influence on political outcomes. The means in question are those afforded by a populist leader, party or protest movement, or some combination of these.

Now I would not deny that there are important respects in which this analysis holds true for contemporary forms of populism. Nevertheless, I think it fails to adequately explain the two characteristics noted above. That is to say, neither the lack of interest of citizens in recommitting themselves ideologically (in the "thick" sense – i.e. to more than just populism itself), nor their willingness to respond positively to affirmations of their practical concerns that are symbolically and expressively charged but devoid of realistic policy solutions, can be explained in terms of the paradigm of populist mobilization as (real or illusory) political re-empowerment.

Certainly, some groups mobilized by populism demand concrete results, and may get them, but this is usually where a populist leader or party has reached a definite understanding with a specific group of voters about how, if voted into office, they will use the political framework to advance the lat-

ter's interests in well-defined areas, in line with the logic of clientelism. Even where several such groups are aggregated together, I think it fails to account for the full extent of their support, which is often a great deal more dispersed throughout the societies in question. Equally, I am sure that a great deal of enthusiasm for populism comes from those willing to naïvely equate a rhetorical acknowledgment of their own particular situation and the emotions it generates with an implied promise of political action on their behalf. (This, of course, allows them to evade the complexities of modern global economics and policy making, and so also the need to defer to expert opinion on these.) The problem with taking such considerations to represent an adequate explanation for populism is that doing so seems fundamentally uncharitable, and therefore in and of itself implausible. This is because it involves ascribing a (weak) disjunction of cynicism and naivety to what is, in many instances, a very large and internally highly varied group of human beings. One is also tempted to add here that it just seems like a plain fact that *not all* supporters of populist movements are either cynical or stupid (or both).

The characterization I gave of those who support populism, in drawing attention to some features that I take to have been largely passed over by existing political commentaries, suggests that a significant group of them inhabit a seemingly paradoxical perspective in one or other of two respects. Firstly, some of these regard themselves as lacking any real practical possibilities for improving their situation, while continuing to endorse a practical view of what life ought to amount to. Secondly, some of them are mobilized by symbolic and expressive forms of political behaviour that divert attention away from the fact that no concrete political action is being proposed or pursued specifically on their behalf – even though that symbolic or expressive behaviour often itself affirms precisely their right to engage in such action. To make maximally charitable

sense of these two sorts of case, I therefore propose to construct a fictional persona, whom I shall call *the ideally reflective populist*. This will be someone who understands herself to inhabit both of the two perspectives just mentioned, and seeks to explicate this to us in each instance by presenting a set of facts about her situation. If successful, these facts will, when grasped, allow us to accept each perspective as an internally coherent stance – albeit one that we may not necessarily feel compelled to identify with ourselves.

As regards the first perspective, I think that our ideally reflective populist would tell us that she views the political establishment as having systematically favoured others at her expense, and that her grievances and concerns *would* – *were* such a thing possible – justify taking matters into her own hands as the only practical way to achieve results. Asked to explain this further, I think she would say that this is not a matter of ideological realignment in the "thick" sense, but corresponds to a rejection of a more general idea. The idea to be rejected is that one's own contingent and parochial concerns benefit from being framed by and subordinated to an overarching normative vision of *any* kind of how a society should work politically. Her claim would be that any promise of benefit to her arising from such political arrangements has been overridden for the foreseeable future by something that counts *ex post factum* as more basic: the antecedent success *of others* in the zero-sum game of subverting the system to benefit a given individual or group at the expense of others. (This is not the same as a cynical endorsement of participation in such a game: it does not imply that one would have viewed the game in such terms even if others had not done so already and/or emerged as "winners".) Asked what all this amounts to more broadly, I think she would reply that in the context of post-traditional societies whose citizens' expectations have been shaped by liberalism, it represents a novel and unexpected state of affairs. The point here would not be to claim that

it reveals some previously unapprehended general and unchanging truth about political systems. Rather, it would be to claim that even if it does not do so, it still functions for those actually touched by such developments as having redefined their current political reality.[25]

As regards the second perspective, our ideally reflective populist would, I think, say that while the substituting in public or political contexts of a symbolic or expressive affirmation of one's right to act (out of self-interest) for actual programs of action may seem paradoxical, there is a standpoint from which it makes sense. Assuming that we have not experienced this independently for ourselves, she would ask us to imagine how we would view our practical pursuit of our own life-goals, were we to find ourselves in a situation where, contingently, there were no "live" options for this. She would say that to relate to one's own life in terms consistent with anything remotely resembling the minimal practicalist premise would *then* have to mean something quite different from before, as now it could only be a matter of relating to how practicality figured in one's past (i.e. one's life-history). To relate to it in such terms, she would point out, can at best be to relate to it contemplatively and in retrospect, much as people try, individually and collectively, to make reflective sense of other aspects of their own life-outcomes in historically closed terms – e.g. as overall success or failure, good fortune or tragedy, redemption or farce. For people in such a situation, deliberately representing or referring (symbolically) in public to a negative dimension of one's life, or giving public embodiment to the feelings associated it, is closely connected with the adoption of a form of emotional detachment for cathartic purposes, in the sense that it

[25] If this is how our ideally reflective populist reasons, then it still presupposes a version of the minimal practicalist premise, as it rides on the assumption that what ultimately vindicates or invalidates all political modes of behaviour, including hers, is how they stand in relation to actual practical possibilities of action (or the absence of these).

enables one to feel and experience things that would otherwise be too overwhelming and potentially destructive. This, our ideally reflective populist would say, is exactly how we should understand the theatrics of populism insofar as they involve an affirmation of one's right to act. She would then point out that in affirming that someone has the right to act, we affirm that they have the capacity to do so – at least in principle. In a context where someone no longer possesses the possibility of exercising that capacity (in relation to what they take to be their essential self-interest), making publicly salient the fact that they still *in principle* possess that capacity amounts to a declaration of loss. Such a declaration, she would add, is suited to functioning as vehicle for catharsis, enabling one to feel the emotions appropriate to a life-outcome that may seem tragic to the point of absurdity.[26]

These two perspectives seem closely related, in spite of their differences. The justification given for detaching the validity of one's practical concerns and interests from any wider normative framework is that the latter has been compromised by others doing just that themselves (i.e. acting out of naked self-interest, conspiratorially, etc.). It involves invoking what one takes to be historically contingent facts about one's own particular situation as it relates to past events – about *one's own past* – as a basis for rejecting what were previously widely endorsed in one's political culture as ahistorically valid institutional norms.[27] Equally, when we symbolically

[26] It may be significant that shifts in voting behaviour are coinciding with a rise in the median age of voters. Whatever causal-explanatory weight one ascribes to actual correlations in this respect, it makes intuitive psychological sense to expect that as people live longer and grow older, they will increasingly value a symbolic engagement with politics over a practical one, as something that can resonate with their desire to make sense of their lives in historically reflective terms.

[27] This point is important for distinguishing such a scenario from occurrences in the non-recent past that might be thought to represent a similar phenomenon, and which might lead one to question whether

or expressively prioritize our own perceived victimhood over practical policy making and delivery, we reveal an affiliation to *our own contingent pasts* as something we feel compelled to 'own', even if it means endorsing those political figureheads who simultaneously encourage us to turn a blind eye to any practical issues that may actually still be relevant to our common future. In one case the potentially universal and normative aspect of practical politics is experienced as overridden by facts about one's own past. In the other, one's reflective relationship to one's own past gains acknowledgment, but often at the expense of the quality of one's engagement with wider ongoing practical concerns. In both cases, a dichotomy between genuinely practical engagement with the future and purely historical considerations pertaining to the past is experienced as having arisen within a given space of potential political engagement. What matters for my purposes here is that it is hard to see how existing political views and theories could retain their persuasiveness for those inhabiting either of these perspectives, given the reliance of such positions on the minimal practicalist premise, as outlined in the previous section of this article.

On my interpretation, the strands of contemporary populism I have been considering arise for certain individuals or groups within a larger community or society, or possibly relative to universal humanity, when historical developments are experienced as having touched some but not others, resulting in a change of perspective on the part of those who have been so touched, such that their perspective is no longer shared

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the current challenge to political orthodoxies is really as unprecedented and sui generis as I am suggesting. What I am claiming here presupposes that we are talking about societies with a relatively long-established and settled culture of liberal democracy. Hence it may not be so easily grasped by those whose own primary focus of concern is with the emergence of populism in countries lacking this feature.

with the others.[28] In such cases, it surely cannot still be assumed that where the public collective life of an entire society is concerned, what matters above all else, so that it ultimately frames the rest, is its practical dimension of engagement with the future.[29] (Were that to be the case, such a dimension could perhaps be presumed to translate neatly into a unified understanding of the political realm, making all political disputes internal to the normative and/or instrumental space so defined.) Instead, a demand for justification arises in respect of our preferences for prioritizing historical over practical concerns, or

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[28] How far this closes off possibilities of mutual understanding, and how far these can be kept open via counterfactual reasoning about how such a divergence of perspectives arose in particular cases, cannot be addressed here. My approach is best read against the backdrop of a premise to the effect that the concepts involved in our understanding of socially constituted phenomena cannot be assumed to require or not require relatively thickly defined and locally variable contexts as conditions of their intelligibility, if they are to be properly distinguishable from the products of speculative and potentially dogmatic theorising. This sort of Wittgensteinian point about context-dependency is often construed rather less minimalistically, as the claim that the conditions for the possibility of learning to participate in normative practices (such as involve language or rule-following) tend to require such contexts to be in force. See L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, transl. G.E.M. Anscombe, Blackwell, Oxford 1953. For a reading of Wittgenstein as first and foremost an anti-dogmatic thinker, see O. Kuusela, *The Struggle against Dogmatism…*

[29] Treating this dimension as paramount means thinking of human life as *at bottom* consisting in something other than our relationship to our past(s), which in turn encompasses the latter. For probably the most explicit elaboration of such a position, see: M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, London, SCM Press 1962 (1927). What will contrast with this are any conceptions that succeed in articulating a set of *radically historical* concerns. Articulating such concerns coherently is a task that presents a unique set of challenges to philosophy, especially if one seeks to do so without resorting to theology or mysticism. For an example of someone who attempts something like this in a highly interesting but, I think, ultimately unsatisfactory way (since it does not entirely avoid these), see: W. Benjamin "The Storyteller" and "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in: *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, Schocken, New York 1969, p. 83–110 and p. 253–264 respectively.

vice versa. But for such a demand to arise in societies whose institutions presuppose that no such questions could be meaningfully asked (in that they reflect practicalist assumptions), is for those societies to be thrown into a genuine crisis of legitimation, independently of whether they themselves acknowledge this or not. Moreover, the prospects for resolving such a situation seem bleak, as the dichotomy between future-oriented and purely historical considerations can also be invoked to undermine any justifications we might give for reading a specific ethico-political significance into the crisis-situation itself. It seems dogmatic to just assume that we can step back from the question of what politically significant scenario, if any, we are in (individually or collectively) with respect to our own pasts, and weigh up such justifications in a neutral way, either on a case-by-case basis or at some level of generality.[30] However, the more complex and internally diversified a given society is, the more decisions made at the level of the polis will require us to do just that in order to be seen to be sensitive to the varied interests and perspectives of the populace. And the more we step back in this way, the more we enter a realm of theoretical or political abstraction in which the two forms of justification seem radically incommensurable.[31]

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[30] Here I am assuming that we are dealing with societies where the social units that need to be taken account of with respect to this dichotomy are not just atomic individuals and a unified social totality, but also many intermediate social groupings or entities, including communities defined by commonalities of contingent experience.

[31] One might claim that political engagements with the past and the future are more fundamentally intertwined than is acknowledged here. Yet viewed in such general terms, it seems arbitrary to think that this would furnish any basis for a more optimistic outlook. One would need to show that it is not the case that such intertwinements necessarily take the form of extracting a value either *for* the future *from* the past, or vice versa, where that disjunction seems to imply just the sort of incommensurability mentioned here. (A case in point is the significance attached by Germans – dogmatically in my view – to the concept of *Vergangenheits-*

3. "Normativism" and "realism" in contemporary political philosophy: the retreat into minimalist abstraction

Turning to contemporary political philosophy, I now wish to sketch my reasons for thinking that neither of its two main strands are equipped to furnish a coherent account of what, given the crisis-scenario just described, we should expect of political life. The first such strand corresponds to what is often referred to as "normativism" (usually qualified as "ethical" or "moral"), while the second has perhaps rather tendentiously laid claim to the term "realism".[32]

I take it that the essential disagreement between normativists like Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls and realists such as Judith Shklar, Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss is one that concerns our attempts to determine the specific content of any normative commitments that define the political realm. It is about whether these commitments should be determined primarily with reference to overarching insights into matters normally construed as ahistorical and non-contingent inasmuch as they concern such high-level normativity-generating notions as dignity (Habermas)[33] and fairness (Rawls),[34] or in some other quite different way. On the alternative approach, broadly construed, such commitments are properly determined with reference to certain sorts of contingent historical fact. The relationship of such facts to any sort of normative

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bewältigung.) I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this issue.

[32] I will be using these terms rather loosely here to mark out broad trends in political philosophy, and not to name the more specific positions which they are associated with in, e.g., the theory of international relations.

[33] J. Habermas, "The Concept of Human Dignity and the Realistic Utopia of Human Rights", *Metaphilosophy* 41/4 (2010), p. 464–480.

[34] J. Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2001, p. 42–44.

understanding is not at all as straightforward as on the first approach, but even so, it is held that such facts can nevertheless be regarded as disclosing important insights into something called "the human condition". Such insights may centre on what is taken to be the historically proven proclivity of human beings to act cruelly and exploitatively towards one another (Shklar).[35] Alternatively, their focus may be the more complex and ambivalent dimensions of ethical accountability (e.g. involving moral luck) that emerge when human beings find themselves embedded especially deeply in the contingencies of their lives (Williams).[36] Another possibility centres on recognizing hidden and unanticipated forms of social causality operative beneath the surface in societies that prefer to think of themselves as successfully implementing ethically normative political programs in ways that need not take these into account (Geuss).[37]

While there are points of divergence between the thinkers I have located in each of these camps, and questions in some cases about whether they really belong there, the points I wish to make are such that we need not take account of these potential worries.[38] This is because viewed in the light of the crisis

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[35] J. Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear", in: *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. N. Rosenblum, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1989, p. 21–39.

[36] B. Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, Sather Classical Lectures, vol. 57, University of California Press, Berkeley / Los Angeles / London 1993, p. 75–102.

[37] R. Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ 2008, p. 70–94.

[38] The literature on how the thinkers mentioned here stand relative to one another when viewed with reference to the distinction between normativists and realists is extensive. For an insightful treatment of relations between Rawls, Shklar, Williams and Geuss that stresses some respects in which that distinction masks points of similarity, in particular between Rawls and Williams, see: A. Thomas, "Rawls and Political Realism: Realistic Utopianism or Judgement in Bad Faith?", *European Journal of Political Theory* 16/3 (2015), p. 304–324.

outlined earlier, both of these tendencies or strands in contemporary political theory converge on a common underlying theoretical strategy which I consider inadequate when judged as a response to this crisis.

In the case of Rawls and Habermas, what we encounter is, crudely speaking, a kind of Kantian logic: it is the assumption that if one pitches one's claims about what is presupposed by human forms of life at a sufficiently high level of abstraction they are bound to capture insights of an ideal-disclosing sort: i.e. ones that are universal, and so non-defeasibly valid as ultimate points of reference for any normative understanding of human affairs.[39]

Indeed, it makes no difference, for these purposes, whether the insights in question pertain to substantive matters (i.e. foundational metaphysical or ethical commitments) or to procedural ones (e.g. the sort of epistemological coherentism involved in Rawls' wide reflective equilibrium): in either case it is enough that they are regarded as non-defeasibly and universally valid. My point will be that this makes them problematic from the point of view of the kinds of populist perspective discussed in the preceding section. Recall that according to these, various institutional and societal norms that *were* considered non-defeasibly universally valid are *now* taken to have been overridden. Seen that way, the very idea of non-defeasibly universal validity seems to have been undermined, and one is led to infer that those who continue to endorse instances of the latter must be doing so out of either blind faith or cynically disingenuous self-interest.

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[39] Cf. R. Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*…, p. 92–94. Although Geuss objects primarily to Rawls' failure to address concrete political issues, such criticisms only work if one has first rejected this sort of underlying, paradigmatically Kantian, assumption as being in some way unwarranted or dogmatic. (A parallel observation will apply to any similar lines of criticism directed towards Habermas.)

This Kantian assumption faces a singular challenge if we seek to apply it under contemporary conditions as I have construed them. This is because it asks us in our actual decision-making to refer our thoughts to a conception of how things ought to be in the world as a whole – how things would look under ideal conditions. At the same time, the overarching regulative ideals that inform such a conception are defined in the first instance by their action-guiding significance: for example, to count as *being* reasonable and fair yourself, you must *act*, or at least *intend to act*, in ways that count as reasonable and fair – and, we might add, in circumstances where your acting actually matters. Such ideals assume that what is at stake for human beings is primarily given in the form of questions about how we should act.[40] But this cannot be expected to cut any ice with those who have disaffiliated themselves from the normativity of political institutions and procedures as such, thinking that what ultimately vindicates or invalidates all political modes of behaviour is just their implications for *their own* actual possibilities of action in the present. After all, in her case, as our ideally reflective populist sees it, historically contingent factors have interposed themselves to largely nullify any such implications: even the commitment to an anti-universalistic version of the practicalist premise has been rendered purely theoretical by events. There remains little or nothing of *real* practical significance *actually* in play *for her*, and so little or nothing that might furnish either the traces or the germ of an engagement *on her part* with how things ought to be with respect to the world, or humanity, or society as a whole.

At first glance, so-called political realists such as Shklar, Williams and Geuss would seem in varying degrees to have an answer to this. Very roughly, this consists in the thought that

[40] This reflects the sort of practicalist preconceptions about the nature of ethical value discussed critically by Geuss in his "Outside Ethics", mentioned earlier.

if we suspend our positive assumptions about the regulative role that high-level forms of normativity might play, and turn our attention instead to what we can learn from actual historical cases of human behaviour and its effects, we can derive a normative framework just from recognizing what forms of behaviour are needed to prevent any reliving of that which we do not wish to see repeated, be it suffering, persecution, or whatever.[41] Since these norms will be justified with reference to our actual evaluative responses to concrete historical facts, it might seem that we really have moved beyond the dichotomy outlined earlier, with regard to whether political matters should be conceived of ultimately in ongoingly practical or historically encompassing terms.

I do not think this is the case. The premise that these theorists share is that for any given community of human beings with a reasonably rich resource of historical experience, we can reliably expect that the contingent historical events they have been directly or indirectly exposed to will furnish some minimal but universal set of normative implications of this kind, such as will hold good for our current and future situations. (Certainly, it would not suffice if all they furnished were individual occurrences of which it could be said, rather trivially, that in each instance things would have been better if *this or that* had not happened, so just *this or that* should be prevented from happening again.)

The problem is that as with the Kantian logic mentioned earlier, that sort of premise simply will not speak to those who inhabit the particular populist standpoints I have been exploring here. We need to remember that seen from within such perspectives, it just is a brute fact that historical considerations have taken over from ahistorical ones as the ultimate

[41] See B. Williams, "The Liberalism of Fear", in: *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, ed. G. Hawthorn, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ 2005, p. 52–61.

terms in which political forms of justification are articulated. On the other hand, for such people to affirm that premise would be for them to impute to historical matters some sort of ongoing regularity[42] that would underlie possible and actual changes in the political sphere – one that would furnish a basis for positing a framework that would hold good for future social and political developments. The difficulty is that seen from the perspective of the ideally reflective populist, unless one has independent reasons for thinking that such an underlying regularity exists,[43] the thought that one's own historically contingent current situation has overridden any enduring normative practical concerns associated with the political makes it natural to be sceptical about any presumption to this effect.[44]

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[42] I.e. ongoing with respect to our present and future situations, or at least our present situations construed as themselves involving a practical engagement with the future.

[43] Such independent reasons might be thought to be provided by a prior commitment to naturalism as a philosophical position, or some other all-encompassing metaphysical stance with similar implications for how observed regularities are to be construed with respect to the distinction between past, present and future. However, I regard it as dogmatic to think that such positions apply to the ethico-social sphere (i.e. the realm in which forms of social validation are operative). Like those who adopt a phenomenological stance towards such matters, I am inclined to steer clear of any approaches that take inductive generalization, nomic regularities, explanatory hypothesizing, etc., as their starting point. For a recent overview of phenomenological approaches, see *The Phenomenological Approach to Social Reality. History, Concepts, Problems*, ed. A. Salice and H.B. Schmid, Springer Nature, Basel 2016.

[44] Williams's attempt to extract a more complex set of ethical points of reference for political thought and practice from a consideration of ancient Greek tragedy than that furnished by Christianity-inspired Kantian moralism or utilitarianism is especially revealing in this respect. He ascribes a set of normative implications to the tragic that are arguably inconsistent with what is really presented there – at least if it is thought of as a negatively transformative unfolding of events that is radically unanticipatable from the point of view of its human protagonists. This is a longstanding reception problem pertaining to tragedy, stretching right back to its political uses in Ancient Greece, as well as Aristotle's attempt to uncover a pedagogical value for the genre. See B. Williams, *Shame and*

What emerges from these considerations is that both strands of thinking turn out to involve the same theoretical stance. We might call this "normativist minimalism". On the one hand, both seek to minimize the extent to which ahistorical considerations can be thought of as imposing normative constraints on political matters generally. They thus both purport to be engaged in maximizing the scope for historically contingent (and thus, ultimately, non-normative) considerations to inform politics. On the other hand, both imply that there will always ultimately be *some* such ahistorical, normativity-generating constraints in place.[45]

It is this last feature that is perhaps most significant in the present context, as it prevents such an approach from speaking in any meaningful way to the concerns of those inhabiting the populist perspective explored here. Yet I would like to finish by mentioning another reason for being concerned about this. My worry is that if "normativist minimalism" is our preferred strategy for trying to preserve the integrity of the sphere of political legitimation as a realm of collective discourse and action in the face of challenges such as those linked to populism, then it may also prove problematic for those who do *not* inhabit the populist perspectives I have been analysing here. This is because the collateral effect of adopting such a stance is that the normative political understanding it expresses ends up being simply too abstract to possess traction with the *actual*

Necessity… See also C. Humphries, "Tragedy and the Limits of Pessimism in Ancient and Modern Realist Political Thought" (forthcoming). (Similar issues figure in an unresolved way in Wittgenstein's middle-period remarks on cultural decline, and arguably inform his later philosophy, which in turn influenced Williams's political thinking. See C. Humphries, "Wittgenstein, Culture and Forms of Life", in: *Wittgenstein, Philosopher of Cultures*, ed. C. Humphries and W. Schweidler, Sankt Augustin, Academia Verlag 2017, p. 43–66.)

[45] Hence my suggested name for this position. The point is that whatever normative aspect of human social and political existence there might be is simultaneously presented as minimal and as ineliminable.

practical challenges of our contemporary social reality, even for those who incline towards valuing such an understanding. The risk is that this may create a further ongoing catalyst for the delegitimizing tendencies currently at work in liberal-democratic societies – if it has not already done so.[46]

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[46] I would like to express my gratitude to Rev. Dariusz Dańkowski SJ for many stimulating pizza-fuelled discussions about political and social philosophy that proved helpful to me while formulating the ideas explored here. At the same time, the thoughts and opinions conveyed here are exclusively my own.

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