Civil society, populism, and religion

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The successes of populist movements and the politicization of religion in the 21st century raise new questions about the relationship between civil society, populism, and religion. In consolidated western democracies, it is populists who are capitalizing on the critique of oligarchic, corrupt, and insufficiently democratic political establishments and their invocation of religious tropes is striking. So is the use by religious entrepreneurs of populist politics to further their own aims. This chapter addresses the paradoxical relationship of populist movements to civil society and to religion. We argue that while populist movements and religious associations emerge and flourish in civil society, the logic of populism and of politicized religion is antithetical to the underlying principles of civil society and, ultimately, to democracy itself. It is important to address the dark side of civil society that these developments represent, in order to show how they undermine instead of realizing its open, plural, critical, inclusive, liberty- and democracy-enhancing features.

Populist movements excel in revealing democratic dysfunction, and remind us that legitimate political action is not limited to voting, or to professional politicians – it includes civil protests, gatherings, movements, self-organized groups, and communications in civil society by ordinary people and civil disobedience (Cohen & Arato, 1992; Moffitt, 2016, p. 145). Religious associations, too, are part of a plural and diverse civil society and alongside other autonomous voluntary associations; they can generate solidarities, and ethical orientations. But the power-political monistic thrust of populist movements and of politicized religion tend to eviscerate not only civil society’s plurality, but also the distinctiveness of the logics of influence and power that undergird the differentiation of civil society and the state, and help maintain the former’s autonomy. Thus, we argue that both populist movements and political religion are in but not necessarily of civil society. On their own, but especially when they merge or ally, populist and politicized religious identity politics pose serious challenges to constitutional democracy. But it is also important to grasp the tensions between them and to see that civil society is where alternative democratizing movements, resistance and opposition to oligarchy, to populism and to politicized religion can develop.

In the first section of this chapter we discuss and update our conception of civil society. In the second part, we take up the relation of populism and civil society in order to show how populist movements tend to undermine the very terrain in which they emerge. We identify
the specific logic of populism ideal typically, and analyze the difference between populist and other, self-limiting social movements. We then turn to the contemporary link between populism and religious identity politics. Not only do today’s populists hijack religion for their own purposes but the reverse is also true: populism can be instrumentalized by politicized religious agendas and identity politics. Yet they are strange bedfellows – populist movements are a secular phenomenon while religious ones clearly, are not. We analyze the tensions and affinities between populist logic and political religion. Together these pose one of the most serious contemporary challenges to a democratic civil society. If the populist temptation and the lure of politicizing religion may be here to stay, a vibrant open civil society remains the best hope for resisting these challenges and generating alternatives. If resistance and creativity in civil society come together with a fight for a new version of the welfare state and a reconstructed party system, it may still be possible for a socially just 21st-century constitutional democracy to defeat the challenge of authoritarianism.

1. Civil society and democracy

Civil society is a contested concept. But every conception involves three parameters – plurality, publicity, and privacy, however variously they are interpreted. Modern civil society is created through processes of self-constitution and self-mobilization. It is institutionalized through laws and sets of basic individual rights, which stabilize social differentiation. Institutionalized structural differentiation together with the rule of law, helps protect the relative autonomy of each domain, and block the leveling, homogenizing tendencies of states and markets vis a vis civil public, communicative, associational, and private life. Autonomous civil society is the indispensable counterpart of a modern democratic constitutionalist polity: both are predicated on the equal worth, liberty, voice, and status of each individual citizen.

But modern civil society, unlike its predecessor (the society of orders, the ancient regime), cannot be represented as a body. The democratic revolutions replace the old dualism between the monarchy and the society of orders with one in which a liberal constitutionalist republic keeps the place of power formerly occupied by the monarch, empty, and modern civil society emerges as dis-incorporated: its modes of existence, activity and social bonds marked by indeterminacy and fluid forms of plurality (Lefort, 1986, chapter 1). Modern constitutional democracy entails not only the separation of powers, but also the separation of the principles of power, law and knowledge, such that right (rights) becomes external to power (Lefort, 1986, pp. 255–256). Thus, the disincorporation of society is accompanied by the disincorporation of power and the disincorporation of right (Lefort, 1988, chapters 1 and 11). The corporate body metaphor (including the idea of civil society as a societal community) is thus wholly inapt: civil society involves a transversal mode of open social relations, which individuals produce and of which they are the terms (Lefort, 1986, p. 257). But the Marxist and communitarian charge that the liberty and privacy accorded to individuals constitutes them as isolated monads is also inapt because the apparent separation of individuals from one another is just one modality of their interrelations, freed from prior corporate status group restrictions: it disguises a new mode of access to the public sphere, new forms of voluntary association, and a new freedom of intimate relationships (Lefort, 1986, p. 257).

Indeed the freedoms entailed in the rights institutionalizing civil society and performed by movement actors even before those rights are institutionalized – freedom of speech, of the media, of association, of assembly, of movement, of individual conscience, personal privacy, and bodily integrity – are what prevent the restriction of the individual to the limits of her private world (while protecting her autonomy in the latter) by state or economic power, and
provide an alternative to the imagined occupation of the symbolic center of society (and its reincorporation) by a single agent, typical of populist political theology (Lefort, 1986; Rosanvallon, 2008; Arato, 2015). However, the very parameters of civil society make it possible for populist movements and political entrepreneurs invoking popular sovereignty to emerge precisely with this agenda: one that would ultimately undermine the pluralist autonomy and corrupt the proper functioning of civil society itself.

What content the parameters of civil society – plurality, publicity, privacy, and legality – entail, shifts over time and varies with technology and the model of civil society one embraces. Here we concentrate on plurality and publicity. **Plurality** involves the principle of voluntary association – the multiplicity of groups, identities, networks, social movements, acting both as important sources of innovation and civic participation, and signaling to the political system new issues, projects and problems. Civil voluntary associations can be issue-specific, local self-help groups, religious bodies, or broader national (and even transnational) membership organizations (Skocpol, 2003; Cohen, 1999). Social movements for the assertion and expansion of rights, for the defense of the autonomy of civil society, and for its further democratization are what keep a democratic political culture alive. To be sure, there are movements and associations that do not aim at democratization, greater equality or inclusion. The confrontation between movements and counter movements is, however, a key dynamic of civil society.

**Publicity** refers to the communicative infrastructure of civil society: civil publics, and the various forms and media used by citizens to speak, debate, and coordinate interactions beyond face to face encounters, and to influence political decision making. A free, autonomous, credentialed press is crucial to the generation of informed public opinion and to – rational critique, fact checking, and oversight – that expose political (and economic) corruption, and help ensure responsiveness and accountability of those in power. There are of course differentiated civil and political publics (Cohen & Arato, 1992), weak and strong (Fraser, 1992), but openness of access and parity of participation (equal voice) is the regulative ideal for all of them. On any liberal-democratic conception, public opinion should be able to influence the debates within political and legal publics proper (legislatures, constitutional courts) and bring under informal control the actions and decisions of rulers and lawmakers. Together with political parties and democratic elections, this idea involves a disembodied, procedural conception of popular sovereignty (Habermas, 1998, pp. 462–490).

But it’s crucial to differentiate between the logic of influence and the logic of power that undergirds social movements and political parties, respectively. Tocqueville’s distinction between political and civil society captures this, “Political society” refers to the decisional political publics in the state proper (legislatures) and to political parties. Parties aggregate constituencies’ interests and articulate political projects that purport to be in the public interest from a partisan perspective. They are the quintessential mediating institutions between civil society and the state. But they are Janus-faced: they emerge as associations within civil society but they aim to acquire and exercise state power, and to make legally binding public decisions for society as a whole. Democratic politics entails party competition for access to political power, along with the acceptance of alternation, respect for the rights and legitimacy of the opposition, and willingness to compromise with (possibly only temporarily) minority parties.

Social movements like parties may articulate a wide set of opinions, interests and demands (Cohen, 1985; Cohen & Arato, 1992, pp. 492–563). They also may focus on redefining identities, on ultimate values, on transforming civil society’s own structures (such as family or gender relations), or on utopian political projects. However, their logic is to influence the parties and authorities that exercise state power, not to take it. Thus, social movements may
be utopian or uncompromising regarding their values in civil society, but must be self-limiting vis-à-vis other movements and especially the exercise of political power. These are analytic distinctions and we all know the phenomenon of party-movements that merge the civil and the political, the logics of influence and power. But once a party-movement enters into parliament, or acquires executive power, it must differentiate itself from its movement logic and accept being one political party/actor among others, able and willing to govern cooperatively and to make appropriate bargains and compromises. Otherwise, the risk is that a party-movement in power construes its “mandate” not as a temporary electoral fact that can change, but as proof that it is the sole authentic voice of the people, with the right to govern alone, with no need to compromise. This eviscerates the legitimacy of plurality in both civil and political society, distorts the logic of influence, and dedifferentiates civil society and the state, thus threatening civil society’s autonomy. Two types of contemporary civil associations are, by their intrinsic logic, susceptible to this dynamic of dedifferentiation: populism and politicized integralist religion.

2. Populism and civil society

Populist movements emerge on the terrain of modern civil society. They benefit from the key parameters and freedoms. Indeed, they often appear to push for more equality, inclusion, voice, social justice and democracy. And yet the logic of populist party-movements is ultimately antithetical to all this.

We are now familiar with the rhetoric of populism and its negative tendencies. Populist movements claim to be the sole legitimate voice of the homogeneous unified authentic people, but this betrays a deep tension with the principle of plurality within civil society (Arato, 2015; Werner-Muller, 2016). Their anti-establishment rhetoric can distort the function of critical civil publics that aim to influence power, into purely denunciatory, destructive, forces that undermine governability (Rosanvallon, 2008). Populist attacks on corrupt elites who allegedly usurp the rightful sovereignty of the morally pure people and coddle undeserving or dangerous others, unleashes an intolerant moralism, scapegoating, and turns those who disagree or differ into enemies. Populist attempt to discredit the “established” accredited press as “the enemy of the people” and when in power, to de-legitimize other political parties, the opposition and the allegedly “corrupt” parliamentary game – (the politics of compromise and cooperation, criticism and alternation between government and opposition). They thus undermine the role of key mediating institutions (the accredited press, political parties) and mechanisms (the separation of powers, parliamentary proceedings, the autonomous judiciary, minority rights) that keep public powers accountable, counterbalance executive power, and make representative democracy inclusive and pluralist. The refusal of populists to differentiate between party and movement once in power along with their embrace of personalized leaders with whom they identify and directly communicate, strengthens tendencies toward plebiscitary politics of acclaim and mobilization from above, ultimately eviscerating the differentiation between civil society and state crucial to democratic politics (Cohen & Arato, 1992; Rosanvallon, 2008; Urbinati, 2014, pp. 128–170). Indeed, populist leaders in power invariably seek to strengthen the executive, to eviscerate constitutional limits inherent in the separation of powers, and suspend basic rights protecting individuals, minorities and counter-powers in civil society all the while maintaining an anti-establishment “movement” stance and when necessary, mobilizing “the people” against the elites as they engage in their own forms of clientelism.

But rhetoric is not theory. We need to construct an ideal type of populism to help identify its sources in civil society and democracy and the normative criteria that it is in tension with.
Populism is ambiguous conceptually and ambivalent politically. As many have noted, what makes a movement, a party, a leader “populist” isn’t a thick, substantive ideology, or program; nor does populism involve a clear collective identity or social strata. Populism entails a discourse, a style, and a thin ideology (Moffitt, 2016). As a discourse, it pits the people against the elites, invokes the people’s sovereignty, and is centered on recapturing it from “the establishment” (oligarchic and governing powers) (Canovan, 2005, p. 67). This and denunciations of corruption and usurpation are a feature of all populisms. Construing populism as a discourse helps us see that political actors and especially leaders in power can be sound more or less populist at different times, opportunistically shifting depending on context and audience (Moffitt, 2016). As a style, populist politics features appeal to the people involving the performative embodiment of the habitus (speech, gesture, dress) of ordinary folk by political leaders claiming to stand for and literally re-present them (Moffitt, 2016). Dramaturgically, it is clear that populist leaders stage their cathedrical unity with their audience through specific scripts, mise-en-scene and techniques in rallies, speeches, and mediated, forms of communication, using vernacular speech (including bad manners), gesture and dress to facilitate identification with the “common man” (Moffitt, 2016). Populist leaders’ political style mimics popular modes, including “bad manners” so as to frame themselves as anti-establishment outsiders, via symbolic re-presentation (Moffitt, 2016). Indeed as a political style, populism entails “repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance”, involving, actors, audiences, stages, scripts, and mise-en-scene, that make clever use of new and old media to appeal to and perform identification with “the people” in ways that merge media logics of simplification, personalization, and dramatization with political logics (policy and processes of persuasion). While all contemporary politicians perforce are subject to media logics, populism as a political style has an elective affinity with and flourish in the context of the mediatization of politics (Moffitt, 2016, p. 76). As with discourse, the populist political style is available to be adopted to a greater or lesser extent by a variety of political actors. As a thin ideology that separates the pure people from the corrupt elite, populism has perforce a normative claim: to restore the good people to their rightful (sovereign) place and enable their unified and previously silenced and excluded but ultimately general will, to rule once more (Mudde and Rovira Kalwasser, 2017). Because it is a thin ideology, populism is indeterminate enough that it can link up with different, thicker, “host ideologies” (nationalism, racism, fascism, even communism), taking its substance and color from the local context (Mudde and Rovira Kalwasser, 2017). Some analysts distinguish between a dyadic left-wing vertical, inclusive populism that opposes “the establishment” to people; and a “triadic” right-wing populism that not only champions the people vs. the elites but also defends them horizontally against a third group, deemed an alien part of the population which the establishment is accused of coddling at the expense of the rightful and authentic people (Judis, 2016, p. 15). The former is allegedly inclusive (i.e. aimed at bringing economically disadvantaged and/or other large social segments of the population into civic and political life) while the latter is typically seen as exclusive, targeting vulnerable minorities as not really “one of us”, as non-identical to “the people”. The apparent democratizing features of populism pertain to efforts to make politics more accessible, comprehensible, and open to the common man, to include ignored but deserving identities and interests, and to critique the high handed and insufficiently democratic features of formal representative democracies. But both versions are ultimately monist, anti-pluralist and once in power eviscerate the features of civil society that make democracy work. Populism’s referent is a unitary conception of “the people”, an empty signifier as Laclau (2007) has argued – that has to be constructed, identified, mobilized, moralized and unified, out of an empirical multiplicity of groups and individuals, to form a bounded subject to
whom action and authority can be imputed. Arguably the friend–enemy dynamic is operative in both versions. Since populisms often entail left/right syntheses, the distinction between left and right populism may turn on which enemies are identified (Arato, 2015). Yet, some analysts argue that populist movements can play important signaling functions insofar as they to bring to light demands, problems, injustices, and issues (such as growing inequality) that established political parties have ignored, triggering critical elections, realignments, and restructuring of democracies in ways that counter oligarchic rigidity and the closure of established political parties (Judis, 2016; Kazen, 1998; Laclau, 2007; Mudde and Rovira Kalwasser, 2017). Perhaps. But other movements and parties also play this role without the baggage and dangers inherent in populist logic.

Indeed we want to argue that besides being a discourse, a style, and a thin ideology – populism has a distinctive political logic. But we do not embrace the approach of Laclau who in addition to identifying some of the key features of that logic, equated populism with the political tout court, and endorsed populist reason and the political theology it entails.  

Populism is an artifact and recurring temptation of modern representative democracy and civil society insofar as it springs from the core legitimating principle of popular sovereignty and lives off the idea that the ordinary people are the source of authority and are ultimately self-governing (Canovan, 2005; Rosanvallon, 2008). Accordingly the people must be able to act both directly in civil society (in the form of a movement or party-movement) and indirectly as the decisional sovereign in the state via their leader with whom they identify and who unifies their will (Canovan, 2005; Rosanvallon, 2008). Populism does not purport to be a political regime distinct from democracy – it is a pathology of democratic constitution-alism, and of civil society, or as Rosanvallon puts it of electoral and counter-democracy (Rosanvallon, 2008, p. 265; Urbinati, 2014).

Why? Populism has a distinctive four-fold logic. It entails a pars pro toto dynamic through which the authentic part of population stands for the whole people; an imaginary of the sovereign people as one, as an ideal unity; a friend/enemy conception of politics, and an embodiment model of representation (Arato, 2015). The pars pro toto logic identifies the authentic people – a group – construed as the core part of the population (against elites, the establishment, an “other”) that stands for the sovereign whole (Canovan, 2005, p. 63). The pars pro toto logic is a permanent risk of democracy due to the ambiguities and indeterminacy of popular sovereignty itself.  

Populism contains no set answer to who the people are. It turns to other sources for this depending on the context. The aggregate conception of the sovereignty of individual citizens is not hard to grasp in pragmatic everyday electoral terms: individuals act as sovereign citizens by voting representatives, judging their performance and holding them accountable in the next election. But the populist version of popular sovereignty invites us to imagine the people as one, as a unitary collective body constructed through the chain of equivalences (Canovan, 2005, p. 89). The logic of majority is different in each case: in the first, the majority is deemed temporary, numerical, an aggregation that can change, and is fallible and open. In the second, should the populist party-movement acquire an electoral majority and enter government, its tendency is to claim the right to rule on its own without limits or compromises, and to delegitimize the opposition on pars pro toto grounds. Neither self-limitation nor pluralism is part of the logic of populism (Cohen & Arato, 1992, pp. 492–564; Ochoa, 2015, p. 61).

An obvious problem is the gap between these two conceptions and how they relate to one another (Canovan, 2005). Clearly populist logic entails a vision of the ideal people as the morally pure majority to whom populist leaders give voice (Arato, 2015, p. 35). But this requires purifying the empirical people, of the alien other within that contaminates it.
This friend/enemy logic of extraction of the real people from the people is constitutive of populist reason (Arato, 2015; Zizek, 2006). Populism seeks to resolve the ambiguities of the identity of the popular sovereign by closing the gap between the ideal and the empirical people (the one and the many) (Arato, 2015).

But more is involved than the friend/enemy logic. The mysterious process that turns a part into the whole eludes ordinary procedures and institutional articulation and cannot be discovered in a simple majority vote or opinion poll (Canovan, 2005, p. 88). As Lefort (1988, p. 19) noted, the paradox of democracy is that at the very moment popular sovereignty is assumed to manifest itself, when the people express their will through voting, number replaces substance. And as we have seen, populist movements and parties do not attempt to suppress elections or undo the universal franchise. But, they do need a way to construct the people as a substantive whole, to discredit the opposition and deny the legitimacy of dissent. Enter the logic of embodiment and incarnation. The indeterminate sovereign people can made visible and come to life when the savior of the savior: the leader of the populist movement, constructs, mobilizes and embodies it (Arato, 2015, pp. 32, 44; Canovan, 2005, pp. 66–67; Lefort, 1988, p. 79). As Canovan (2005, pp. 89–90) shows, this pits the pragmatic and the redemptive modes of “democratic” politics against each other: the former corresponds to the ordinary diversity of the people as population while the latter corresponds to the promise of salvation through the emergence of the promised political savoir, who will make the ideal unitary people – that mysterious collective being – determinate.\(^8\)

But there is another gap at the center of democracy that the populist understanding of popular sovereignty seeks to fill – the gap between the symbolic and the real (Canovan, 2005; Arato, 2015). Lefort argued that democracy involves a radical break with previous political theological form of society because it leaves the place of symbolic power formerly occupied by the monarch, empty. The democratic revolution doesn’t obliterate that place but institutes indeterminacy: society can no longer be represented as a body, its unity can no longer ascribed to a determinate person (monarch) or agency that incarnates it and makes it one. The symbolic and real of head of the king has been severed and society is now civil society: a multiplicity of individuals and groups whose very differences, divisions and open interrelations are constitutive of the democratic polity. Put differently, the democratic revolution breaks with the thelogico-political matrix that gave the monarch two bodies, (modeled on Christ), and made him both a secular agency and political theological one mediating between the transcendent and the mundane. This symbolic structure sacralized monarchy and the political institution of society as a whole.

Democracy institutes a form of society in which social division and plurality is itself constitutive of unity rather than a sign of inadequate social integration. The empty place of power entails the symbolic establishment of division and contestation (Arato, 2015, p. 41; Lefort, 1988, p. 226). Democracy thus dispenses with the representation of society as an organic totality and of civil society as a corporate entity composed of segmented semi-autonomous corporate bodies. The indeterminacy of the concept of the people follows from this, as does the openness and diversity of civil society’s publics, associations, movements and networks engaging with and contesting matters of public concern. Accordingly, the symbolic structure of democracy entails a plurality of democratic forms of participation, a plurality of actors on the political stage, and an open inclusive pluralistic civil society secured by sets of individual rights open to periodic reinterpretation and expansion (Cohen & Arato, 1992).

As one of us has shown, populism’s predilection for a unitary, substantive conception of the people, its friend/enemy logic, its effort to frame that part as the whole (pars pro toto) with moral superiority, its affinity with symbolic representation and with the logic of
embodiment, and incarnation, entails a modern form of political theology (Arato, 2015). This evident in populist leaders’ rhetoric: they insist on their identity with the people, claiming, “I am not me, I am you”, “I am the people’s voice”, etc., thus purporting to be the vessel and the tool of the people’s sovereignty, deploying an obvious political theological version of a secularized prophetic imaginary.

It is this four-fold logic that puts populism in tension with civil society. If the part stands for the whole and if the authentic people is constructed through extraction and regeneration via a process of symbolic re-presentation whereby the populist leader incarnates the people as a unitary subject (that otherwise does not exist) then it is impossible to have other legitimate representatives of the people in society or in government. Even if populist parties appear pluralistic internally (constructing chains of equivalences among heterogeneous groups, social strata, demands and interests), no other social movements, in civil society may make a legitimate claim to represent the people. The apparently inclusive we, (the friend dimension) cannot operate without a frontier: a radical antagonism vis. a vis. “them”, the other (Laclau, 2007). That other is perf orce an enemy, because populism invariably construes the people and the non-people, and social antagonism generally, in moralistic Manichean terms. Other movements and party opposition are discredited and delegitimized, and this may well set the stage for more drastic solutions should the populist in power, feel threatened. Targeting the separation of powers, the press, independent courts and rights of opponents and minorities is a standard part of the populist playbook. Populist politics reject the limitations and criticisms these institutions impose and the self-limitation that differentiation between the logic of parties and of social movements entails. While political parties in power should remain receptive to movement voices within civil society, they must also govern, and take responsibility for their decisions without pretending to be the mere vessel of “the people” (it isn’t me it’s you) or to still be the anti-establishment movement in civil society (thus denying responsibility for its policies and failures). Indeed the gambit of the populist leader in power is to retain the mask of the beleaguered outsider constantly foiled by the opposition or by the “deep state” even when (s) he is busily exercising and expanding executive power, and corrupting or eviscerating counter-powers and mechanisms meant to keep that power in check.

Populism is thus in but not of civil society. Indeed, Rosanvallon’s (2008) discussion of how populism distorts three key civil society mechanisms that he labels counter-democracy is right on the mark. The functions of oversight, of “negative sovereignty” and critical judgment are all perverted by populism. By turning oversight into a permanent stigmatization of “the establishment”, and by framing government and all authorities as essentially despotic, populism destroys the basic trust that makes democracy and dissent work together. Populism also distorts the functioning of “negative sovereignty” – the role of public opinion, opposition parties and movements – in articulating cleavages, alternative political projects, new needs, etc. Critique morphs into sheer negativity, turning preventive power into an end-in-itself, and making democratic governance impossible (Rosanvallon, 2008, p. 171). Part and parcel of this is the curious approach of populists to the media. Populists make use of while attacking the independent media of civil society. Populist movements are adept at using the media of communication within civil society to communicate horizontally, to mobilize and to criticize established power. This is an exemplar of democratic participation of citizens in their role of “the people as judge” – the third counter-power Rosanvallon (2008, p. 171) discusses. But the ambivalent features of the new media have also long been noted: unfiltered immediacy of voice, information, and response make it hard to distinguish fact from fiction, information from disinformation and so forth. Populists in power are adept in exploiting these
ambivalences, deploying the newest technologies to directly appeal to the people as audience through a form of permanent electioneering that couples the plebiscite with the web (the party with the movement) (Urbinati, 2015). They use “participatory” media to constantly attack the professional accredited press, to discredit science, established facts as well as fact checking that may challenge the populist leader’s claims and bona fides. This undermines trust in the reliability of any and all expertise and in investigative journalism, which is crucial for the development of informed public opinion and the proper functioning of the role of civil publics and of the citizenry as judge. Instead of fostering the accountability of public power and the autonomous projects, indirect influence and judgments of a plural open civil society, populism revives the image of society as a body and the political theology of unity, incorporation, embodiment and incarnation. It rejects the self-limitation of movements and their differentiation from political parties once in power, and thus must be seen as a pathology not only of representative democracy but also of its indispensable counterpart: autonomous civil society.

3. Populism and religion

But political theology is not religion so how do we assess the contemporary centrality of religion in populist politics? It is striking that since the end of the 1990s, right-wing populists not only in the U.S. but also in “secular” European democracies invoke religion as a key support (Marzouki & McDonnell, 2016, pp. 1–2). This was not always the case. Especially in Western Europe, populists tended to challenge the church as part of the establishment and many embraced neo-pagan ideologies (Marzouki & McDonnell, 2016). But religion is now playing an important role in the new populisms, although which religious identity is invoked, varies. The range in the West goes from what Rogers Brubaker aptly calls the new Christianist secularism (especially France), to the blending of catholic nationalism and populism in Poland and Hungary, the re-emergence of Christian discourses in the U.S. linked to populist tropes in a new amalgam that Gorski calls “Christianism”, to the invocation of a civilizational discourse requiring the return to and protection of Christian or Judeo-Christian-Humanist spiritual foundations of the religious heritage of the West as a whole (Brubaker, 2016; Gorski, 2016). Current populists shift back and forth between these and sometimes combine them. As noted, populism tends to take on the color of its surroundings. The “religious” content that comes to fill the ‘empty signifier’, the sovereign people, varies with its context.

It is not hard to decode all this as opportunistic populist identity politics that “hijacks” religion to help define the “friend” and “enemy” components of the people (Brubaker, 2016; Gorski, 2016). Given the politicization of religion everywhere today, this is hardly surprising. Religious identity is being used to constitute an insidious other who is undermining the people’s homogeneity and corrupting their traditions with alien values, beliefs, and forms of life. Religion persists even in the most secular of western democracies, and is thus available as a host identity for populist mobilization. Most analysts insist on framing the religion-populism linkage in terms of a dichotomy between identity and belief, arguing that populists speak of identity but churches and the religious speak about faith and belief, and are concerned with religious practice (Gorski, 2016; Marzouki & McDonnell, 2016; Roy, 2016). The former invoke Christian, Judeo-Christian or Christian-Secularism as an identity to be protected in order to render Islam (and in some cases Judaism, again) foreign and incompatible with integration into the authentic people’s community in Europe. The version of populist religious identity politics present in the current U.S. also attacks secularists as part
of the elite establishment, which has allegedly been eviscerating the true religious identity of
the American people for some time. So whereas in France, secularism is becoming a trope for
Christian vs. Muslim identity, for Europe as a whole, the populist right advocates a Christian
civilizational frame not in order to promote Christian values or a religious revival, but to block
the “islamization” of European public space (Gorski, 2016; Marzouki & McDonnell, 2016;
Roy, 2016). As Olivier Roy puts it, religion has become a marker of identity in populist
politics, but populists tend to be secular and to place “Christendom” as a civilizational (or
national) culture above Christianity as a faith (Roy, 2016, p. 186). The referents are to
symbols such as the cross, not to theological dogma or doctrine; to Christian culture, not
belief, yet Muslim symbols held to be explicitly religious, dangerously proselytizing, and
culturally alien (Roy, 2016, p. 195). Indeed the “cultural-ization” of religion in Europe is as
Brubaker (2016) notes, doubly convenient: it allows Christianity to be privileged as a culture
in a way that it cannot be privileged as a religion in the most secular part of the world, given
the liberal state’s commitment to religious neutrality. But it also allows minority religious
symbols and dress to be restricted as religious proselytizing while simultaneously framing Islam
as an anti-democratic anti-liberal subversive (terrorist) politics rather than as a religion. Gorski
(2016) makes a similar argument regarding the U.S. by distinguishing between “Christianism”
– a secular form of religious nationalism denuded of ethical content and transcendental
reference – from Christianity as a faith and an ethics. Accordingly Christianity is a religion,
but Christianism now linked to populism is a political program, which has nothing ethical or
sacred about it (Goldberg, 2017).

These theorists certainly have a point in distinguishing religious association and belief from
the instrumental appropriation of it by populist demagogues. Yes, populists hijack religion and
turn it into useful tool for their friend/enemy identity politics. Populist use of religion is a
mobilization strategy not an indicator of adherence to a faith or the revival of religious belief and
values. But it is worth digging more deeply into both the tensions and the affinities between
religion and populism. Populism is in tension with monotheistic, salvation religions for a variety
of reasons. First, they refer to very different and incompatible sovereigns: the sovereign people
and their very worldly authority in the case of populism, vs. a transcendent sovereign deity, an
otherworldly lawgiver whose earthly high priests are religious figures, not politicians. As
indicated, populism entails political theology: a secularization of religious sovereignty models
that puts the people in the place of the king (whose two bodies and mediating role between the
transcendent and the worldly already was already a secularization of Christ’s position) and, once
in power, the leader as the acting sovereign representative is put in the place of the people. But
from the perspective of the religious, and of churches, the near deification of the sovereign
people and of their leader as the quasi-sanctified vessel and instrument (prophet), of their
message (good news), is tantamount to idolatry. The confiscation of religion by populists and
attempts to use it to sanctify the nation, the people, or the leader, and to conscript it into the
service of the political friend/enemy logic is, from the religious point of view, blasphemy. Moreover,
the conflation of the flag and the cross by populist identity politics not only entails
belonging without believing, it ultimately has, a secularizing logic (Roy, 2016, pp. 199–200).
This is certainly not what religious believers or churches, want. In short, the ontology of
populism is secular, while that of religion, obviously is not (Brubaker, 2012). Thus, however
they come to interrelate, religion and populism, theology and political theology are distinct and
in a competitive relationship in terms of legitimacy and ultimate authority.

Yet populist logic and rhetoric also have an elective affinity with certain religious ideas or
tropes. The themes of impending doom, the need to ward off evil others, to purge the people
of corrupting blood, of sacrifice (again, blood); the portrayal of the world as a disaster and the
country as lost in the wilderness, talk of an existential crisis (even if there is no real crisis) and the need to ward it off, are all rather obvious apocalyptic tropes borrowed from religion by populists. A Manichean imaginary supports the friend/enemy concept of politics that demonizes evil others, and millenarianism together with the messianic idea of the need of to save the people through purification and to reverse cultural corruption via the arrival of the right leader (Katechon) pervades populist discourse and logic. These religious themes are hardly new to American versions of populism; they played a key role in the Tea Party and now in Trump’s own brand (Williamson, Skocpol, & Coggins, 2011; Marzouki, 2016; Hackworth, 2012).11 They can now be found in neo-populisms in Europe and in Latin America as well.

Beyond this, we argue that contemporary populism turns to religion for two other reasons. As we know populism is protean and it can define the people in a variety of ways. The empty signifier “the people” needs content in order to establish an identity – something more than just being anti–elite or anti–foreigner. Populist politics also needs a convincing moral claim to trigger the self–righteous indignation necessary to construct, define and mobilize the authentic “good” people against the alien other. In short, populism has to vindicate its moralism and adopt an ethical content to motivate, justify and render its thin ideology, thick. It has done so in the past by pairing up with powerful mobilizing host ideologies. But today previously available host ideologies able to serve that purpose are no longer up to the task: fascism and communism are discredited, ethno–and even cultural nationalism is no longer a taken for granted binding force, is inadequate to the multi-ethnic, multi–national character of most contemporary societies and in the epoch of post–colonialism, it has lost its emancipatory aura. After years in power (and after embracing neo–liberal austerity), socialist and/or social democratic parties don’t credibly stand for an ethical, solidarity– and equality–oriented alternative. Political religion, however, is on the rise and can used for friend/enemy identity politics and the moralization needed by populism, quite well. Religious identity politics provide unifying content for the chain of equivalents in populist logic, helps moralize the friend and demonize the enemy, and to frame the elites and “others” as immoral and corrupt, and thus part of a deeper threat to “our” traditions that must be warded off, while providing a needed moral aura for populist politics. Thus the availability of religion and religious identity in civil society (domestic and transnational) allows populist entrepreneurs to thematize it and render it politically salient to help fill the structural needs of populist politics.

But what do the religious or churches gain from populism? As already indicated the populist vision of “belonging without believing” is hardly a religious logic. The transformation of religion into a pure marker of identity without any positive religious content and without being tied to traditional religious values must be disconcerting to those for whom faith matters and real belief exists. The tension between the secularizing logic of populism and religion is most obvious in Western Europe (Roy, 2016, pp. 199–201). There the religious catholic and evangelical Christians reject Islam as a false religion, not as an alien culture. When they ally with populists mobilizing against Islam, they do so at their peril as this may further undermine religious values and foster secularizing trends (Roy, 2016, pp. 199–201). Christian clerical elites may still believe in the Christian identity of Europe, but for them this is a religious claim. Indeed it is part of project aimed at fostering a post secular society in which (Christian) religious symbols, values become omnipresent and trigger a new spiritual dynamism within the churches animated by new generations of believers (Roy, 2016, p. 200). This means Europe is mission territory, a place that has to be reconverted to Christianity (Roy, 2016, p. 200). But there has not been a Christian religious revival in Europe, and the churches that wish to foster it have to affirm Christian belief, a universal spiritual message and Christian values and these tend to conflict with the exclusionary identity politics of populists (Roy, 2016, pp. 197–198).
The situation in the U.S. is different and highlights another way in which religion and populism can ally. There, religion is alive and well and evangelical Christians – an expanding movement – are now the right-wing core of the Republican Party. They endorsed the presidential candidacy of Donald Trump – an irreverent, profane, sybarite hardly known for his religious convictions or concerns (Goldberg, 2017). It is true that neither the most pious of the evangelicals nor the religiously affiliated (churched) among Christian conservatives were attracted to Trump. Leaders in the evangelical movement like Billy Graham Jr. and Jerry Falwell Jr. supported him early on, but sophisticated theologians did not, and the former can be seen as political-religion entrepreneurs rather than serious religious thinkers (Gorski, 2016). This confirms the tension between a clearly secular populist leader using religion opportunistically and those who take religious faith and values seriously. Apparently among the religious evangelicals, those who attended religious services every week preferred Cruz but, strikingly, those who are less “churched”, supported Trump against Cruz in the primaries by 27 points. Nevertheless over 80% of evangelicals did rally to Trump, as did other religious conservatives (Goldberg, 2017).

Once Trump seized the Republican nomination and chose Mike Pence, a deeply religious evangelical protestant and savvy political insider, as his running mate, religious conservatives realized that their path to federal power and influence lay with this irreverent, profane, obviously irreligious populist president (Goldberg, 2017). The fundamentalist Christian right had no real chance to gain power on their own, or even to use the deeply divided Republican Party to push through their agenda in Congress, despite the obstructionist successes of the Tea Party during the Obama administration (Marzourski, 2016; Williamson, Skocpol, & Coggins, 2011). But Trump can now be seen as the religious right’s Trojan horse (Goldberg, 2017). It seems that the conservative religious right has hijacked the populist Trump to get their people into power on his coat tails. Their success is evident in the cabinet he has assembled, which includes, Attorney General Jeff Sessions, committed to abolishing the wall of separation between church and state as unconstitutional and known for his hostility to abortion rights, Ben Carson, Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development who wants to put God back into Government, Betsy Devos, the Education Secretary with an agenda to redirect public education funds to religious schools, Tom Price the Secretary of Health and Human Services who joins Pence in co-sponsoring bills granting legal personhood to zygotes, and Mike Pompeo, the Director of the CIA who views America as engaged in a religious war with Islam (Goldberg, 2017). Early policy decisions are omens of what is to come should the religious right continue to hold sway in this administration. Among the first executive orders was a rule to cease funding for overseas medical facilities that even mention abortion, and the immediate push to defund planned parenthood by the Republican-controlled Congress with the collaboration of the administration along with highly symbolic efforts to exempt any corporation that protests having to pay even indirectly for health insurance that covers contraception together with the highly publicized presidential challenge to the Johnson amendment that forbids ministers from supporting political candidates on the pain of losing their tax exemptions, not to mention the elevation of Neil Gorsuch to the supreme court clearly, all clearly signal that the project to Christianize our society and government now has the kind of federal support that conservative Christian groups could only dream about prior to Trump.

While they could not win on their own in an open political contestation over their religious ideas on social issues (the latter barely figured in the campaign), Christian conservatives are getting their agenda pushed through the back door at the administrative level and via the courts. This agenda is predicated on the assumption that the true America is Christian America, the authentic American people are Christian, and that the constitution, itself is a
Christian document and therefore a sacred symbol of the nation. This version of politicized religion intends to use the state to re-traditionalize civil society by reasserting Christian patriarchal family values – in the domain of intimacy, social life, gender and sexual relations, schooling, and so forth. It comes, of course, at the high price of the egalitarian gains, freedoms, and plurality of contemporary civil society. Yet the politicization of religion and the imposition of religious values by an alliance of religionists and populists in power may turn out to be a Faustian bargain, because the politics of coercive piety tend to turn religious people off, as Tocqueville noted long ago. It could backfire, and lead to disgust on the part of young religious believers who take their faith seriously and yet have different views on social, racial, and political issues than the religious entrepreneurs now in power. This is already happening in the U.S. (Goodstein, 2017). Indeed, the opportunist and exclusionary logic of religiously inflected populism could also trigger a general backlash in civil society that can put the lie to its claims to speak for the people as one.

4. Conclusion: civil society vs. populism and political religion

In the U.S. at least, we are already seeing an astounding resistance to Trump’s brand of “populism” on the part of progressive elements in civil society. The explosion of activism, mass movements, and the mobilization of myriad, diverse, grassroots associations and groups, some coordinating with national resistance movements (“indivisible”), is staggering. The protests and pressure being exerted in town halls and on the net, in marches and in organizing, seeking to re-exert influence on and render responsive, political representatives in Congress, and on the state and local level, are already having an effect. Indeed civil society is generating new interest in becoming politically active among sectors of the population who never were active before, including generating new candidates for public office who aim to protect and defend basic rights and to block candidates who seek to take them away. Civil society’s resistance and dissent delegitimizes the core populist claims – plurality and mobilization trump the pretense of unity and the pars pro toto logic.

It is crucial to defend the achievements of past struggles that have made civil society more democratic and expanded rights to previously excluded sectors of the population. It is also crucial to defend constitutionalism, the separation of powers, the free press, and the autonomy of political society, administrative agencies and legislatures from executive fiat. But to counter populism in the 21st century an offensive and not only a defensive strategy is called for especially with respect to two crucial areas: the decline of the welfare state and the democratic deficit plaguing all western democracies. Unless progressives can develop a new version of the welfare state and fight for it on domestic and supranational levels, the staggering increase in inequality over the past 40 years in western democracies that embraced neo-liberalism in various degrees will benefit populist authoritarians instead of democratic egalitarians. In addition to new public policy programs aimed at leveling the playing field and protecting losers of globalization or of technological innovation, what we once called “economic society” must be revitalized: programs of workers control, councils, co-determination, re-unionization etc. so that voice and participation within the economy, that empower workers and consumers are crucial. Similarly, the demand for more democracy should not be neglected but must be put on the agenda by progressives in civil and political society. Creative thinking is required for 21st-century programs of democratization of democracy but these cannot be left to technocrats or political elites. To be sure, other actors matter too: opposition parties, investigative journalists, experts (the most recent protest march of scientists), courts – each have their role to play. But without the resistance, mobilization and pressure exerted by civil
society activism, professional politicians, accredited media, and experts would be much less effective and prone to the anti-establishment critique. Only counter publics, movements, and associations, in civil society committed to plurality and self-limitation, democracy, openness, and inclusion, can provide the energy and hope called for to reinvigorate responsible and progressive politics needed to revive and create forms of democratic constitutionalism appropriate to the 21st century.

Notes

1 Arato (2015) criticizes Laclau.
2 See Skocpol (2003) on the transformation of American civil society organizations and for her debate with Robert Putnam over this. Today, thanks in part to new media of communication and in part to genuine political concern, we are witnessing a revival civil associations that entail new forms of belonging, cooperation and participation that foster political paedia once more and can be seen as alternatives to the corporate managerial NGO model.
3 One must think of the distinction between civil and political publics as a continuum. Weak publics are relatively speaking more deliberative and open to fewer constraints on deliberations. Strong decisional publics are more constrained both qualitatively and quantitatively (time for deliberation is shorter), as they have to reach collectively binding decisions. A consciousness-raising group in a feminist movement is an example of a weak un-institutionalized civil public open to all sorts of statements and reasoning. A jury or a local council is an example of an institutionalized civil public that is “strong” in the sense that its deliberations lead to politically binding decisions. A parliament is an even stronger institutionalized political public, legislating for the whole of society. For another way of distinguishing between the various constraints on different sorts of publics see Rawls (1993, pp. 212–254).
4 It could also refer to local councils or workplace councils.
5 To Mudde, populism always entails a challenge to the liberal constitutionalist dimensions of liberal democracy, allegedly in the name of greater democracy for the authentic people.
6 Zizek criticizes Laclau for political theology and for social antagonism into friend/enemy politics that ontologize and scapegoats an externalized reified alien absolute other.
7 Lefort discussed this logic regarding totalitarianism; Canovan, Arato, Rosanvallon, and Laclau apply it to populism. Canovan and Laclau seem to think political theology and myth making is unavoidable. Lefort, Rosanvallon, and we disagree.
8 The discussion in Canovan (2005, pp. 89–90) is illuminating.
9 Marzouki and McDonnell (2016) discuss right-wing populism in Western Europe.
10 This is so even if the identity of the friend is not defined explicitly in religious terms (van Kessel, 2016, pp. 67–68).
12 Indeed the Tea Party itself is ambivalent, composed of an uneasy alliance among anti-tax conservatives more than willing to use government to impose their religious agenda on the rest of us and anti-tax, anti-government libertarians who despite defining themselves as the “good” Christian and American people, are libertarian also regarding abortion gay marriage and religious freedom and anti-statist.

References


