
Populism: Unacceptable Danger Or Legitimate Weapon?

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The Challenge of Populism: The Rise of Right-Wing Democratism in Postwar America, by Michael P. Federici. *Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1991. 157 pp. \$42.95.*

While Michael Federici never explicitly attacks the cultural and political convictions of those he identifies as right-wing populists, he clearly deplores their adoption of the rhetoric and techniques of direct democracy. "By calling for a renewal of American politics through direct popular control of government, postwar right-wing populism has allied itself with the tradition of plebiscitary democracy and put itself at odds with the tradition of constitutional democracy," he contends. "In doing so, right-wing populism overlooks the intimate relationship between political order on the one hand and leadership, tradition, and culture on the other. It assumes that the unchecked will of the majority is the best measure of the public interest; consequently, right-wing populism, as is the case with the Religious Right and the economic populists, advocates the use of initiative, referendum, and recall to make American democracy

more plebiscitary."

Federici, an assistant professor of Political Science at Mercyhurst College, begins this well-documented and lucidly written critical examination of the philosophical and theoretical aspects of postwar right-wing populism by tracing its historical roots to Rousseau, Jefferson, and Paine. He lumps together with these figures the Anti-Federalists, the Jacksonian Democrats, the Populist Party and Progressive movement even though he knows that the populist label would not apply to all Anti-Federalists or Jacksonians. Many Anti-Federalists were patrician regionalists while the Jacksonian Democrats included prominent States Rightists as well as democratic populists. This tradition of direct democracy, he claims, is radically at odds with the constitutional principles postulated by our Founding Fathers at the Philadelphia Convention in 1787. To the

extent that these democrats “oppose constitutional measures to restrain the momentary popular will, . . .” they are “anticonstitutionalists.”

Federici defines populism broadly as “the tendency to let the uninhibited majority will govern the nation.” Among the positions and attitudes exhibited by populist movements are a suspicion of elites coupled with a faith in the good sense of ordinary people, a preference for the agrarian life, a religious basis, a conspiracy theory, and anti-intellectualism. Previous studies, he claims, have been deficient because they tended to be exclusively quantitative or focused entirely on the institutional development of direct democracy. His examination, by contrast, describes the intellectual origins of populist ideas and assesses their “potential danger to the constitutional state.”

Central to Federici’s analysis is the distinction he makes between competing concepts of democracy. Drawing substantially from Claes Ryn’s *Democracy and the Ethical Life* (expanded edition, 1990), Federici summarizes the conflicting views of human nature, political community, and the ends and purposes of government and society held by constitutional democrats and plebiscitarian democrats.

The theory of constitutional democracy is indebted to the view of human nature developed in the tradition of Classical/Christian thought found in the works of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Richard Hooker. Fundamental to this position is the belief that human nature can be explained in terms of a

dualistic tension between competing wills. We possess the potential to be governed in our acts and thoughts by a universal ethical standard. We have also within us arbitrary, selfish impulses. By restraining disruptive desires with reference to an ethical standard, we bring ourselves into genuine community with other similarly ethically disciplined persons. In a constitutional democracy, the constitution, likewise, serves as a standard against which the many conflicting passions and interests of the society are checked.

Plebiscitary democracy, by contrast, depends upon an entirely different theory of human nature. The roots of its intellectual tradition can be discovered in the works of Rousseau, Jefferson, and Paine. Man’s nature is not substantially flawed, as the ethical dualists hold, but good, although corrupted by society. According to this argument, given man’s natural goodness, any constitutional checks placed upon the popular will would be unnecessary and morally indefensible.

Distrusting human nature, the constitutional democrats propose a variety of institutional and cultural checks on the will of the majority (e.g., constitutional checks and balances, a scheme of representation, federalism, a federal judiciary and intermediate social and political structures). They generally fear rule by the momentary will of a numerical majority.

The term “constitutional democracy” may not adequately describe the system Federici celebrates. “Democracy” does not imply here the same set of conditions that the ancient

Greeks or the Founding Fathers had in mind. The fundamental characteristic of democracy, as depicted by Plato and Aristotle, was the undisciplined passion for equality by those who perceived themselves as have-nots. Federici's "constitutional democracy" is certainly not a regime driven by class resentments but resembles instead the mixed regime which Aristotle called a "polity": in other words, an aristocratic government with a popular element. Like the ancients, the authors of the Constitution also viewed democracy as a defective regime.

While many commentators uncritically praise direct democracy, Federici's analysis amply demonstrates why this approach is not the best means by which to measure the public good. Voters are often ill-informed on the substance and consequences of the laws on which they are asked to pass judgment. Voting on ballot questions also precludes the possibility of compromise or deliberation or any possibility of the various contending groups' reaching a consensus position. Ballot questions tend to divide the community and result in the imposition of majority interests upon unwilling minorities.

While there is little fault in Federici's argument that unchecked majoritarianism is inimical to constitutionalism, one may dispute his contention that the rise of right-wing populism constitutes the primary challenge to constitutional order. The growth of the modern administrative state and decades of judicial activism have already sufficiently recon-

structed the constitutional system into something that would be barely recognizable to the Founders. In comparison, at their best, populist measures offer a vehicle by which voters can launch occasional guerrilla strikes on the margins of the leviathan state.

The present popularity of direct democracy cannot be attributed entirely to widespread intellectual error. There are compelling historical reasons why people have been driven in a populist direction. Federici acknowledges this fact when he observes that the force energizing the rise of right-wing populism is public resentment over such divisive issues as abortion, crime rates, rising taxes, and the teaching of secular humanism and alternative sexual lifestyles in public schools. During a period "when so many have lost confidence in the ability of the existing elite to transmit the values of the American heritage," he further admits, "it is possible that more direct participation of the people in government can help renew these values." Yet, he concludes, "the mass of ordinary people cannot sustain or invigorate traditions over time without the aid of leadership."

Federici correctly concludes that the current crisis is moral rather than economic and is in no sense curable through populist policy fixes. Hence, in the absence of an enlightened leadership capable of cultivating, developing and transmitting our moral and social traditions to the rising generations, even the most wisely conceived populist proposals will not have any enduring positive effect on society. Nevertheless, direct democracy is the

only practical political weapon left to many by which they can defend their family, community, and property. Given the present paucity of alterna-

tive mechanisms of resistance, the rise of populism likely will continue unabated despite Federici's best arguments.