First – a disclaimer. Dealing in political philosophy is, or can be, a theoretical endeavor replete with conceptual analysis and critical moments. When we move to political science (with no undue weight attached to the "science" moniker) the tension between theory and praxis becomes more tenuous, with concrete description moving forward to a more essential position.[1] Description, however, of facts, persons, movements, and phenomena is temporally determined: facts, persons, movements and phenomena change. And the dependence of theory on descriptions, or at least their mutual effect, makes the theoretical aspects of the analysis contingent as well. This is all merely to say that there is no certainty or permanence attendant on the current offering in this article. It was, when first presented in November 2019, an investigation into populism which seemed to be exquisitely pertinent to (then) current events. The research and investigation of populism grew, in the past half-decade immensely; in fact, the Cambridge Dictionary 2017 "word of the year" was populism. But in the intervening months the human, political scene has been so upended that I am now a little less certain as to the meaning and ensuing relevance of populism to (now) current events. That is to say, its future purchase is perceptibly uncertain.

The title above is formulated as a question; I will be here questioning the presuppositions behind that question. In other words, I will be in the gratifying position of questioning my own thoughts – thoughts that are held, I presume, by many others; thoughts that are, and have been for a while now, almost consensual in common political discourse. First, however, let me begin with two short stories to set the stage.

In 1996, in one of a multitude of cafeteria conversations had in a university in Israel – where university cafeterias are, by definition, the setting for political discussion – in an unexceptional meeting with another philosopher, I voiced the so often articulated lament and fear that we in Israel were plunging into "fascism".[2] My interlocutor, the formidable Marcelo Dascal, a philosopher of modernity (Kant, Leibniz) and of language (dealing mostly in pragmatics and the theory of controversies), was of Brazilian extraction, i.e., from South America with its attendant political sensitivities. His critical comment to me was that fascism was a misnomer for what we were afraid of. What we were facing with great and justified trepidation was, he said, populism!

Many years later, in the American context, after the election of Donald Trump as president and as his presidency was clearly becoming a subject of media consternation, the popular

news anchor Rachel Maddow began speaking of populism as well. What was striking about Maddow's mention of populism was its positive tenor: it seemed that she was attributing populism to a democratic milieu, pinpointing it as one of the helpful modi of democratic action. It was only after several such affirmative allusions to populism that she began – perhaps as a result of collegial correction – to associate populism to President Trump and to accordingly negate it.

Defining Populism

In the descriptive invitation to the conference where I first presented these observations, and in multitudinous other sources, we encounter the statement that "politics is the art of persuasion," adding that "too often reasonable arguments can only persuade people to a limited extent." But we must make note here of the difference between *persuasion* and *convincing*. The art of persuasion is the oft-quoted definition of rhetoric, while convincing is more robustly due to reason and logic. Of course, these two – rhetoric and logic – are not strictly unrelated when we view them under the spotlights of persuasion and convincing. Some may think that logic and rational argument – i.e., convincing – are the best tools of persuasion. Others hold that rhetoric – i.e., persuasion (perhaps even its turn to emotions) – must be guided by rational, even cynical, calculation. Together they recruit both rationality and passion, and politics is an obvious locus of the two together. Since populism is a political concept it behooves us to ask about its turn to and roots in both rationality and passions.

The analytic exercise to be tried out here asks about populism with a view to reason and passions; it also attempts to decipher whether populism is a tool, is only a tool, or is also a tool. And if a tool at all, then to what purpose? Populism is an "ism," and isms are viewpoints, worldviews, positions, and doctrines – viz. capitalism, communism, socialism, liberalism, feminism, etc.; or tools and methods – like prohibitionism, criticism, plagiarism, terrorism. Some isms (e.g., colonialism, intellectualism, supernaturalism) are both. The first step of our analysis consists, subsequently, of the question "is populism an ideological goal", i.e., a worldview that provides one with a goal to be achieved? Or is it a tool with which one works for achieving a goal (and what, then, is the goal)?

Answering this essential question doubtlessly involves defining populism; perusal of handy definitions and characterizations is therefore instructive. Kazin is explicit as a definition-provider turning to rhetorical method: “The most basic and telling definition of populism: a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter” (2017 (1995), 1). Mudde and Kaltwasser provide the category of ideology as the natural home for populism, defining it as “… a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people” (2017, 6).

Laclau is profound, yet perhaps less overt, telling us that “[b]y ‘populism’ we do not understand a type of movement — identifiable with either a special social base or a particular ideological orientation — but a political logic.… The language of a populist discourse — whether left or right — is always going to be imprecise and fluctuating” (2018 (2005)). Urbinati seems to be putting the vagueness of the term along with its uncertain categorization, gestured at by Laclau, up front: “The term ‘populism’ itself is ambiguous and is difficult to define in a sharp and uncontested way. This is because it is not an ideology or a specific political regime but rather a representative process, through which a collective subject is constructed so that it can achieve power” (2019). Norris and Inglehart take the double path, of rhetoric and ideology, in saying that “[p]opulism is understood… minimally as a style of rhetoric reflecting first-order principles about who should rule, claiming that legitimate power rests with “the people” not the elites” (2019, 4). And Pappas seems to unequivocally adopt the ideological path by identifying populism as a political stance of modernity: “Populism as a modern historical phenomenon pertains to a type of democracy that stands midway between liberalism and autocracy” (2019).

These absorbing “definitions” may sometimes propel us automatically to an answer regarding the ideology vs. tool question. Kazin and Urbinati gesture at a tool while Mudde and Kaltwasser, along with Papps, pinpoint an ideology. Some – like Norris and Inglehart – overrun the two; others, like Laclau, seem to evade the issue (perhaps deliberately). These latter provide, finally, outstanding portrayals of populism that leave the question open, providing challenging insights that, indeed, continue harping upon it. Such is Chantal

Mouffe's suggestion (which is, of course, attributed to Laclau). In her shared depiction (2016, 3-4), populism is the creation of a people; the creation of a people has to do with the establishment of a boundary between an "us" and a "them"; and that boundary is (perhaps usually, perhaps always) between the people and the establishment! Noticeably, these features may manifest, alternatively or in chorus, both the essence of a *worldview* (about a people, an "us", a distinction, and an identity) and the efficacy of a *tool* (as the crux of creation).

Short Detour: Populism and Fascism

The first story above addressed the distinction, yet also similarity, between populism and fascism and noted the perceived affinity between them. Initially attributed to Mussolini and semantically carrying the emblem of *fasces* – a bundle of elm or birch rods with an ax as the symbol of penal authority – fascism *is* clearly a political ideology. It is often associated with centralized dictatorship, with social and economic regulation, and with violent suppression of any opposition, all of which are, in actuality, tools in the service of an ideology, a worldview. And the essential, important part of the worldview, a veritable *Weltanschauung*, is its highest value: the nation (or sometimes the state or even the race), clearly posited over the individual. Importantly, it is fascism, while usually adopting extreme militaristic ultra-nationalism, that holds a contempt for democracy and liberalism and elevates social hierarchies that are "natural" (i.e., the rule of elites). German fascism, for example, was dedicated to creating a *Volksgemeinschaft* (people's community), where individual interests significantly made way for national ones. The nation was the *people*. And therein lies the connection between populism and fascism!

Seeing populism and fascism as two foundational *ideologies*,[3] we may differentiate between them by identifying the core matrices of the former as the "plain" people, the self-serving elites, and rule by popular will, and those of the latter as the holistic "nation," the "new man," and an authoritarian state. These are then used to assess political manifestations as one or the other. But this recognition of the ideological difference between populism and fascism cannot ignore their inter-merging: in practice, fascism has borrowed aspects of populist discourse and style, and populism can degenerate into leader-

oriented authoritarian and exclusionary politics. In other words, these two ideologies make use of the same tools in the praxis which is a quest for conceptually distinct goals. Indeed, tracing the historical routes fascism and populism have followed, Finchelstein notes that "… fascism morphed into populism in history"! He sees the "dictatorial genealogies of modern populism" in fascism: "… populism is an authoritarian form of democracy that emerged originally as a postwar reformulation of fascism." Locating both ideologies on general spectra, populism is placed between democracy and dictatorship and, more explicitly, between liberalism and fascism. "After 1945, especially in Latin America, and later in the rest of the world, fascism often became populism – not the other way around." The circumstantial and universal post-war repudiation of fascism led to a "democratic reformulation" of regimes that "drew on residues of fascism to challenge liberalism… but still engaged in democratic electoral processes" (2017).[4]

Populism as a Tool – and More

Assuming we continue positing a working hypothesis of the possibility of viewing populism as a tool, the second step of our exercise consists of a conditional question: If a tool, then for what? The practical, obvious goal is – in politics – to achieve power. The more significant goal is – in politics – to further an ideology. And that is what invariably leads, immediately, to the most tasking aspect of our questioning – an awareness of different goals being pursued by populism and, very explicitly, the possibility of "right populism" and "left populism." Recall our second opening vignette – about the television anchor, Rachel Maddow, on the American TV channel MSNBC, consensually accepted as a "left" media venue. Her transformative move from viewing populism positively (or, at the very least, neutrally) to attaching it to negative aspirations (mostly Trump's) reflected the common wisdom which associates populism with the right. (This also coheres with the conflation between populism and fascism above.) It befits us to ask, however, how or why that move was made; in other words, how and why have we arrived at an almost consensually negative reference to (rightist) populism? Is this a general characterization of populism adopted by the liberal persuasion, that is to say, the more easily articulated liberal characterization of populism? (And what is to be the (crude) place of an economically rightist while culturally leftist liberal persuasion *vis à vis* populism?)

A simple yet admittedly also simplistic suggestion holds that right populism – as a political tool, and very explicitly a rhetorical tool – appeals to emotions. Correspondingly, left populism is taken as appealing to reason. (There it is again – the difference, in rhetorical terms, between persuasion and convincing.) This basic bifurcation provides a tempting answer to questions concerning the (usual) success of rightist populism: it is more rhetorically proficient, a better tool. This is, however, overly facile. We move forward, therefore, to considering populism not as a means to an end; or as not only a means (to some complexly related end).

This third step of the exercise, speculating upon populism in a more intricate fashion than as simply a tool for political ends, enjoins us to ask yet again what we mean by populism. The work of three philosophers – Simon Critchley, Nancy Fraser, and Chantal Mouffe – will serve admirably in pointing to different conceptualizations of populism, more complex and therefore perhaps more difficult to grasp or even achieve. The fascination in their work inheres it its ability to guide us through a differentiation between leftist populism and rightist populism, producing, consequently, a composite blend between reason and passion.

Different Options of Populism

In an interview conducted in 2015 Simon Critchley expounded on his (then) current view of politics in Europe and in the U.S.A. Two outstanding perceptions arise from the context of that interview. First, 2015 – pre-Brexit and pre-Trump – is certainly at risk of being anachronistic in principle, not just circumstantially. Secondly, as insinuated in my opening paragraph, given the current global crises (COVID-19 and BLM, just for starters), the fluency of Critchley's world-view stands in stark contrast to many present equivocations. But even given the times of the interview and the then general exclamation of the threat of populism, it is striking that he is not averse to saying "the European Union has a deficit of populism" (Critchley 2015)!

Looking to both Gramsci and Laclau, Critchley locates a clearly formulated leftist populism, straightforwardly distinguished from rightist populism. Gramsci's intuition that in politics we must deal with the formation of a group and, more so, the establishment of "common sense" among groups that have different, diverging beliefs, commitments and commitments

is well-known, of course. Laclau's additional posit that "all political discourse is populist" gives one pause, but is made clear when we realize that politics is the business of formation of a group which we recognize as "the people" – putting together individuals and groups having particular interests and becoming a "commonality." Attending to this group – the people, the commonality – is precisely populism and clearly left-wing politics would be much the poorer for ignoring it. Politics is not merely governance; it is, or should be, "good" populism. One does not want left-wing politics to give that up and engage only in value-less governance; one needs "good" populisms, run by "genius" politicians who can create a "genius" politics bringing that very "people" together.

How do we differentiate, however, between left populism and right populism, that is to say, between good and bad populism? Here Critchley provides us with robust philosophical criteria. Turning to Rousseau and the idea of universality, he distinguishes between "local populism" (which emphasizes a particular nation or race) and "universal populism" (which insists on equality or equal participation). The essential, practical point of cleavage is that the first is exclusivist, the second inclusivist. The former is rightist populism, the latter leftist populism. This has interesting consequential points of note. Languages, for instance, may be exploited to emphasize exclusivity; just as fruitfully – perhaps more so – they function to connect and unify differences. They are, simultaneously, tools of local and universal populism. Critchley's attitude to nations and nation-states is a similar attempt to contain a uniqueness of a people in the political structure of an inclusive universalism. Thus, the nation-state may be done away with (in favor of greater and more tolerant governance-structures), but the nation and one's identification with it is not easily denied. The European Union's formal desertion of the nation-state was laudable, but its attempt to kill the nation itself, and all it entailed in human intercourse, failed, because persons must identify with something (a party, a people, a nation). Thus is explained the "backward" move to local, exclusivist populism seen today – or in 2015 – in Europe.

Thus far Critchley has hailed the ideological goal of populism. Yet importantly, he brings in the importance of our *way of doing politics*, i.e., our means to the end of universal populism. "There can be no politics without passions," he says, "… and it then becomes a question of how these morals [in the sense of the ways of life, the practices and ways of life that the people take part in], which are passionate, can be mobilized and transformed… the task of politics is the linking of politics to morals and morals to passions and then having the

political skill to re-describe those morals and these passions for different purposes." So using and turning to passions is a tool for "different purposes" – and these can be leftist or rightist. Does that mean we address different emotions, different passions, for left and for right, in leftist and rightist populism?

Critchley says yes and no. For him "anger is the first political emotion," but the right uses it much more efficiently while the left and liberal-left want to defuse the anger and make politics dispassionate. The left *should* use anger, but use it differently and more intricately. In great detail Critchley has set out the analysis of how important legitimate politics is (winking again at Rousseau) and how populist movements can make peace with "regular" institutional politics. That is to say, the *art* of politics "consists in taking the passion… and linking that to the formation of a set of political institutions." Clearly then, Critchley is offering us a meld between passion and reason – a combined left populism.

Two years after Critchley's interview – that is, after Brexit and after Trump – Nancy Fraser engages generally with similar issues, addresses the relevant political context, and offers, in particular, an additional vocabulary that contributes to our thoughts on differing populisms (Fraser 2017). Her impetus is the current (in 2017) global *political* crisis, which is importantly part of a *general* (political, financial, cultural, social) crisis. Its political strand is, in Gramscian terms again, a *crisis of hegemony*.[5]

A stimulating aspect of Fraser's analysis is her history of how the current, populist moment in the U.S. – Trump and Sanders (in 2016) – came to be. Note that Fraser charges both protagonists with populism, but these are diametrically different versions of populism. Sanders' is termed a "politics of recognition," voiced in universalist and egalitarian language (against the rigged economy), talking to a broad working class "us" – factory workers, public-sector employees, service workers, with active recognition of women, immigrants, and minorities. Contrastingly, Trump emphasizes nationalist and protectionist tropes, heavily tinged with the usual hate-foci of misogyny, racism, Islamophobia, homophobia, and anti-immigrant bias. The "us" in his rhetoric is to be expected: male, white, straight, and Christian. Importantly, however, in both cases the populist practice is *rhetorical*. Rhetorically, Sanders' "expansive view of the U.S. working class" distinguishes his populism from Trump's narrow, exclusionary one.

As in Critchley's nomenclature, this is a turn to inclusivity as opposed to exclusivity, yet with both under the populist umbrella. Fraser calls them *reactionary* vs. *progressive* populism. Trump's rhetoric (during the presidential campaign) turned to a "hyper-reactionary politics of recognition with populist politics of distribution"; Sanders' rhetoric – imbedded in an ideology – used an "inclusive politics of recognition with pro-working family politics of distribution." But, in fact, Sanders lost, and Trump has reneged on the fabricated populist politics of distribution, adopting, instead, a hyper-reactionary politics of recognition. According to Fraser this is not even reactionary populism but rather hyper-reactionary neoliberalism.

Fraser's thoughts are of the concrete political American situation and its devastating developments. Since the shape of things to come, as it seemed in 2017, is shady at best, it is legitimate for her to ask "Could populism still be a possible option… in the longer term?" That populism is, for her, an ideology to be treasured in its progressive form; its success using the strategic tool of "us" is not, however, assured or even promising.

Profound Populism

Moving on to Chantal Mouffe (2016) we encounter a philosopher in whose writings on politics the theoretical and practical cannot be detached. Committed to "doing" politics as much as to investigating its thought, Mouffe in earlier times was devoted to bringing back the old lines between Left and Right. She viewed European social-democracy as having failed to fight against the center-right (which was "captured" by neo-liberalism, inadequately challenging it, saving the banks, insisting on austerity, etc.). Her more recent work has, however, moved onwards, admitting that there is a need to go beyond that traditional social-democratic Left and reach out to more of the "people," including the poor and the middle class. In this sense, there is the necessity to "build a new political identity," in Gramsci's words, a "collective will," a people. "Our lives and our bodies are all today affected by the consequences of financialized capitalism. It is on this terrain that we can hope to build a transversal project. This construction of a transversal political identity articulated in an emancipatory project is what I call a people" (2016, 3).

For Mouffe, just as for Critchley and Fraser, there is a right and a left populism. Right

populism is the result of a "cross-sectional vote" voicing values – i.e., moral, national, and religious norms – that are right wing. So left populism must do the same with left-wing values; condemning xenophobia or authoritarianism is an explicitly mandated left-populist maneuver. This is a substantial move since, she says, "the difference between a right-wing populism and a left-wing one owes to the fact that the former tends to restrict democracy while the latter works to extend and radicalize democracy" (ibid.).

For Mouffe, following Laclau's definition of populism (as creation of a people, enacting a boundary between "us" and "them"), the question hinges on who is "us" and who is "them." Significantly, there is no denial on her part of the otherness of "them," but rather a nuanced understanding of that other. The "them" can be either an enemy or an adversary. An enemy must be killed; with an adversary the antagonism "is negotiated within the framework of democratic institutions." The result is more, not less democracy – a democracy which is radically reformed and pluralized. The inclusivity here is impressive, with an emphasis on pluralism – a recognition of the heterogeneous and divergent demands of groups. So, the demands are not those of "a people" as against a super-rich minority (see Occupy Wall Street), but a pluralist framework for negotiating conflicts. This is actually a move from liberalism to democracy: the rule of the majority with essential respect for minorities.

Is this populism a tool or an ideology? And does it turn to passion or reason? "What defines politics is an irreducible dimension of conflictuality…" Mouffe says (2016, 5). But there is no way to simply work through conflicts rationally, since that would just be "governance" rather than real politics. Antagonism is present in a conflict with no rational solution; instead, there is a demand that one take sides. "Taking sides – and for me, that is what politics is – thus introduces another fundamental element, which is the role of passions and emotions" (ibid.). "Us" is emotional! So, we must recognize the antagonism, between adversaries, not enemies, in a conflict that cannot be rationally decided. And we must establish democratic institutions which envelope and domesticate the antagonism, even while it still exists, and let emotions thrive in the places of culture. "The place for emotions and emotional identifications is essential" (2016, 6).

The implications here for the left are immense: it cannot and should not remain devoted to rationality alone and thereby evade populism (and fascism). "You do not fight emotions *with* ideas, but with emotions stronger than those you want to displace. And for ideas to have

some force, they have to translate into emotions"[6] (2016, 7). This does not mean leaving rationality behind; but it does mean that the Left must not think that it can limit itself to a rationalist idea of politics. It is mandated to turn to populism as a politics melding reason and passion.

Conclusion

If populism is merely a rhetorical tool, it can be used for right or left ideologies with a turn to passion or reason respectively; thus imagined it is, ultimately, uninteresting (except for students of rhetoric). If populism is an ideology, placing the people in the place of its highest value, it can be pulled to the right deteriorating into fascism, or to the left aspiring to (a greater and better) democracy. Reason and passion then play a more delicately tinged role, and the recognition of both as essential to praxis – without nevertheless denying the theory – permits us to enquire about and critique populism as an authentic doing of politics.

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Endnotes

[1] This is reminiscent of the Wittgensteinian edict of description in philosophy: “We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place.” (*Philosophical Investigations* 109).

[2] The scare-quotes around “fascism” are intentional, of course. I will return to the populism-fascism duo shortly.

[3] See Eatwell, 2017.

[4] For an instructive analysis of the populism/fascism relation, see especially Urbinati 2019 (Introduction).

[5] For Gramsci, “hegemony” is the ruling class’s creation of a natural status for its rule through the adoption of its world view by the whole society as common sensical. This become institutional and organizational by the coalition of social forces which produce a “hegemonic bloc”. Other, “lower” classes can challenge the ruling hegemony by creating a “counter-hegemony” and a “counterhegemonic bloc”.

[6] Mouffe adds a personal note: “That is why I find Carl Schmitt interesting when he remarks that liberals claim to be able to talk about politics using a vocabulary borrowed from economics or morality. Fundamentally, liberals are trying to build a political philosophy without politics”.