

'People', Politicians and Populism¹

'Your people, sir – your people is a great beast'²

IF THE ZOOLOGISTS ARE TO BE BELIEVED, THIS WORLD appears very different to members of different species of animals. Flowers conceal patterns and markings that are visible only to insects; dogs inhabit a world reeking with enticing scents; the bats' *Lebenswelt* echoes with highly significant squeaks. Something rather similar is true of political animals as well. The political world that faces the true-blue Tory has contours different from those that present themselves to the militant socialist, while what the liberal sees as the manifest data of politics is different again. Each of them, contemplating the common political world, has his attention caught and held by certain phenomena beside which others fade into insignificance. It is not surprising, therefore, that each has resort to a different key concept to sum up his experience. For the ideal-typical conservative, the basic datum of political experience is the totality of the historic political community, the nation. Like Rousseau's patriot, from the moment he opens his eyes he sees his country, and to the day of his death he never sees anything else.³ The socialist, by contrast, his

¹ This paper is descended from earlier versions presented to seminars at the London School of Economics and at the Universities of Lancaster and Manchester. I am indebted to those who joined in the discussions for many helpful comments and suggestions.

² Alexander Hamilton, quoted in *A Memoir of Theophilus Parsons*, Boston, 1859, p. 109.

³ *'Considerations sur le Gouvernement de Pologne'*, in *The Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. C. E. Vaughan, Oxford University Press, 1962, Vol. II, p. 437.

attention held by a different range of experiences, wonders how anyone can fail to recognize the importance of social classes and the rift between them, while the liberal in his turn suspects the others of being deliberately obtuse when they refuse to see that distinct and different individuals are the basic components of political reality.

In ideal-typical form, then, three classic ways of perceiving the world of politics, each expressed in its own central concept, correspond to the three most familiar ideologies. But we should not allow the charm of triadic form to persuade us that these three exhaust the possibilities. There is at the very least one other way of mapping the political landscape, one other feature that can fill the foreground of political vision and express itself in another key concept. To some, the basic datum of politics is 'the people', and the man who sees the political world in these terms is the populist. His key concept, however, is not quite on a par with 'nation', 'class' or 'individual'. As we shall see, it has some highly significant peculiarities of its own.

Populism as a type of political outlook or movement is notoriously hard to pin down. So-called 'populists' are to be found on the right, left and centre of the political spectrum, and almost any generalization about them can be defeated by a counter-example. As I have suggested elsewhere,⁴ the only feature all of them have in common is a rhetorical style which relies heavily upon appeals to the people. Although there are a number of reasons for populism's vagueness of reference, most of which are outside the scope of this paper, part of the explanation lies in the peculiar ambiguities of this key notion, 'people'. It would of course be unrealistic to expect great precision in any key political term, for concepts that bear a heavy burden of significance in politics tend to become complex and unclear. What, after all, is a 'nation'? What delimits a 'class'? Nevertheless, the notion of the 'people' is unusually intractable. Its peculiarities have gone largely unremarked, because in spite of its prominence in modern

⁴ M. Canovan, 'Two Strategies for the Study of Populism', *Political Studies* XXX 4, December 1982; M. Canovan, *Populism*, London, Junction Books, 1981, pp. 294–8. See also E. Laclau, 'Towards a Theory of Populism', *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism – Fascism – Populism*, London, New Left Books, 1977. On the range and elusiveness of populism, see G. Ionescu and E. Gellner, *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969.

political discourse, it has been very little studied by political theorists. Most other key political terms have been subjected to prolonged analysis: there are numerous (though generally inconclusive) studies of the concept of a 'nation'; library shelves overflow with the theoretical literature on 'class', and the liberal concept of the 'individual' has in its turn been subjected to intensive critical study. 'The people', by contrast, has hardly been analysed at all, a puzzling omission until we remember that populists tend to be rare in academic circles.

In what follows, I hope to shed some light upon the notion of 'people' – and, thereby, upon populism – by looking at its uses in political discourse. Since terminological usage is something highly specific to particular cultures, I shall concentrate upon English-speaking political discourse, although my argument has wider implications. I shall argue that the term's most significant characteristic in English is an extreme flexibility which allows its different senses to approximate closely to the keywords of the three most familiar modern political outlooks. This has two important implications. In the first place, the term's specific ambiguities make it a kind of common currency into which the concerns of most brands of politics can be converted, thereby providing politicians with a fund of rhetorical devices. In other words, its flexibility makes possible what one can call a 'politicians' populism' which is a matter of style rather than substance and which, as we shall see, is particularly useful in blurring political divisions and aiding catch-all politics. Secondly, however, the term's range of senses also allows it to draw together a set of political views that are populist in the more substantial sense of forming an ideological complex distinct from the more familiar and institutionalized ideologies. I shall argue, that is, that the various senses of the term in modern English usage serve as the focus for a collection of political attitudes that are recognizably 'populist', and provide a means whereby we can identify and analyse what populism means here and now. First, however, we must look more closely at the current political uses of 'people'.

RIGHT, LEFT, CENTRE AND THE PEOPLE

There are, broadly speaking, three senses in which 'people' is commonly used in modern English:

1) *The People as Nation*

We often use 'people' to refer to a whole political community or nation, as in 'the Polish people', 'the people of New Zealand'. The usual implication is that all those native to a particular country are included, and that together they form a community with a common life.

2) *The People as Underdogs*

In a more restricted sense, the term can be contrasted with some kind of elite or upper class to refer not to the whole community, but to the less privileged majority of its members, as in the expression, 'a man of the people'.

3) *People as Everyman*

Besides using the word with an article – 'the people' or 'a people' – we talk about 'people' in general, as in 'there were a lot of people at the meeting'. That is, 'people' can mean individual human beings at large.

In its first sense, 'people' fits comfortably into the classic conservative mould. When we talk about 'the British people' or 'the people of Argentina' we usually mean the nation, the country, implying a corporate whole that encompasses all living members, but that also reaches back into the past and stretches out to the future. The people in this sense are not merely a collection of persons, but an articulated and structured community, perhaps under the guardianship of natural leaders.⁵

In this organic, corporate sense, 'people' in English (as with its equivalents in other languages) has obvious, though by no means exclusive, affinities with conservatism, especially in its 'wetter' versions. Nevertheless, there can be no question of the term being monopolized by the Right, for in the second of the senses already listed it is a vital rallying cry for the Left. Although 'the people' may at times mean the whole nation, it can equally well refer to a particular section of the nation (a majority but by no means the whole): to what used to be called 'the common people',⁶ the lower classes. When radicals talk about 'giving power to the people', or try to

⁵ See e.g. E. Burke, 'Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Works of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke*, London, Holdsworth & Ball, 1834, Vol. I, pp. 524–5.

⁶ This phrase, like so much overtly inegalitarian language, seems to have gone out of currency during the Second World War.

encourage 'people's culture',⁷ it is this sense of the term that is operative, and it is of course in this sense that the British Labour Party has sometimes been called 'The People's Party'. From the point of view of a socialist, 'the people' are the workers, the labouring class contrasted with the parasitic capitalists. Although this left-wing people includes less of the population of any given country than its right-wing counterpart, this is compensated for by its links of solidarity with the (lower-class) peoples of other countries. Like its Tory equivalent, this people is perceived as a community with a common life stretching back into the past and a common destiny in the future. It is therefore possible for it to be represented collectively like a family: just as the Queen can talk possessively about 'my people' and mean the nation, left-wing politicians can also talk about 'our people' and have a concrete community in mind.

Right and Left alike conceive of the people in collective terms as a community of one sort or another, even though they disagree about the boundaries of that community. However, common English usage does not oblige us to think of the people as a corporate body at all. The term can just as well have a sense (the third on our list) more congenial to liberalism, and mean a collection of individual persons. Perhaps it is not accidental that linguistic usage underlines this point in the English-speaking countries that are the heartland of liberalism. In English (unlike many other languages) 'the people', though a collective noun, takes a plural verb: we say 'the people are united', not 'the people is united'.⁸ This resistance to collectivism is strongly reinforced by the fact that we can drop the article altogether and talk about 'people', i.e. persons. In this case the word does not imply the existence of any collectivity at all, but refers to people in general, an indefinite number of individual human beings. Consequently a phrase like 'people have a right to self-determination' has a liberal, individualistic flavour to it, and this flavour often lingers about 'the people' even when it is used with an article.

⁷ See Su Braden, *Artists and People*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, *passim*.

⁸ For comments on the significance of this, see G. Sartori, *Democratic Theory*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1962, p. 18.

It is a curious and little noticed fact of English usage, therefore, that this vitally important political concept is ambiguous twice over. It can refer either to the whole political community or to a sub-community of the lower classes within it; furthermore it need not refer to any community at all, but can mean individual human beings in aggregate. These ambiguities enable the language of 'people' to form a kind of lingua franca which can be spoken by conservatives, socialists and liberals alike, as well as by the many who would not choose to confine their political views within any such category. This means that to think of the various senses of 'the people' as if they lived in separate territories belonging to different political persuasions is an artificial over-simplification of the real situation. Few of us are acutely sensitive to the precise meanings of the words we use, and if different senses of a particular term are available, its users will tend to wander from one to another, usually unconsciously, sometimes deliberately playing on its ambiguities. In the case of 'the people', although its main senses may have natural affinities with three distinct political ideologies, these ties are elastic and not particularly restrictive. Politicians in particular find that the language of 'people' presents them with a set of rhetorical motifs that can be used in widely differing circumstances to promote mutually hostile causes.

There are some words, said Sir Ernest Barker, that 'sound in men's ears with the sound of a trumpet'.⁹ 'People' is undoubtedly such a word, indispensable in modern political rhetoric. It forms the basis both of a unifying rhetoric appealing to 'the people' as the nation, and of a radical rhetoric mobilizing 'the people' as the underdogs. Both of these can be reinforced by the fact that 'people' means anyone and everyone, and, above all, there are no sanctions against switching from one meaning to another.

To look first at the integrative rhetoric, 'the people' in its sense as nation or political community carries with it a diffuse but persuasive sense that the politician's hearers belong to a *single* people which has an essential and profound unity. Politicians frequently use it in this way to try to discredit the

⁹ Sir E. Barker, *Reflections on Government*, London, Oxford University Press, 1942, p. 1.

political activities of their opponents by suggesting that these latter are trying to break the natural unity of the people. The speaker's own party, by contrast, are its defenders.

This is a natural device for conservatives to adopt, and it is easy for them to attack class-based left-wing politics in these terms. The interesting point is, however, that the language of 'the people' is sufficiently flexible for this same style of rhetoric to be used much more widely. Socialists are by no means averse to this kind of language on occasion,¹⁰ while it is a type of appeal particularly well suited to new parties that are trying to break the mould of politics and to unite followers from across existing party lines. The basic principle assumed in the rhetoric is that the people are really one body, but have been unnaturally divided by squabbling factions. The new leaders will therefore respond to the popular desire for unity, heal the wounds and put the people first.

There is nothing new about this strategy in English-speaking politics. In the USA in the 1890s, the American Populists used it against the old parties with considerable, if transient, success. The same approach has recently been adopted in Britain by Alliance politicians who argue that 'the people of Britain' do not want divisive class-based parties, but want a movement that will stand for the whole people. As David Steel said at the Liberal Party Assembly in 1982:

'We represent a new kind of leadership which is not imprisoned by class or ideology or sectional interest. We offer a new kind of politics which truly represents all the people.'¹¹

Counterbalancing this integrative rhetoric of 'the people'

different causes, many of them only doubtfully classifiable as left-wing, some emphatically of the Right and some in the political centre.

In American politics in particular, where the alternative language of class is not readily available, this anti-elitist style of populist rhetoric is very common. Nineteenth-century Populists contrasted the people with 'the plutocrats, the aristocrats, and all the other rats',¹³ and a Populist leader summing up the political situation at a rally in Kansas in 1890 told his audience:

'You will see arrayed on one side the great magnates of the country, and Wall Street brokers, and the plutocratic power, and on the other you will see the people.'¹⁴

While the heirs of this Populist style are still to be found in American politics,¹⁵ divisive populist rhetoric in modern times has had much more impact there in its radical right-wing versions. Senator McCarthy's followers used to sing 'Nobody loves Joe but the Peepul',¹⁶ and 'the people' here are contrasted with the Establishment, the educated, the 'pointy-headed intellectuals born with silver spoons in their mouths' of George Wallace's denunciations.¹⁷ These examples should not lead us to suppose, however, that divisive populist language is necessarily linked with political extremism of one sort or another, for it can be just as effective in milder versions that contrast 'the people' with professional politicians and bureaucrats. This motif is common in the utterances of Alliance politicians in Britain, and that most unlikely of populists, the Rt Hon. Roy Jenkins, is on record as having declared that the Social Democratic Party had 'brought politics back from the professionals to the people'.¹⁸

It is clear, then, that we are dealing with a notion that is inherently elastic. 'The people' *can* on occasion have a fairly

¹³ N. Pollack (ed.), *The Populist Mind*, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1967, p. 337.

¹⁴ L. Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1976, p. 192.

¹⁵ e.g. J. Newfield and J. Greenfield, *A Populist Manifesto: The Making of a New Majority*, New York, Praeger, 1972.

¹⁶ R. H. Rovere, *Senator Joe McCarthy*, London, Methuen, 1960, p. 22.

¹⁷ S. M. Lipset and E. Raab, *The Politics of Unreason*, London, Heinemann, 1971, p. 350.

¹⁸ *The Times*, 5 October 1981.

precise political sense as either the nation on one hand or the workers on the other, but there is very little to tie its considerable rhetorical appeal down to either of these senses, or to confine its use to any one political group. This extreme vagueness of reference certainly owes something to the fact that 'people' also means persons, anyone. Since we are undeniably all 'people', that is, human beings, it is not surprising that audiences respond so easily to 'the people' as a slogan. The British People or Working People are people like you and me: how can 'the people' in question fail to include us? The existence of this very general sense of the word does a great deal to disguise its imprecision, so that in its integrative sense it can be even vaguer than 'nation',¹⁹ and in its divisive sense much less precise than 'working class'.

Although it is possible to distinguish between these different basic senses and to identify rhetorical styles based on them, there are no rules obliging users to stick to one sense or another. Audiences and readers will not notice if a politician first uses one sense and then shifts to another, and there are in fact great rhetorical gains to be made by playing upon more than one sense at a time. Consequently, those who use populist rhetoric rarely stick exclusively either to its integrative or to its divisive variant. We have already seen that the old US Populists and the new Alliance politicians in Britain contribute examples to both categories. To see these rhetorical shifts at work, however, we can do no better than to turn to the utterances of one of the finest recent practitioners of populist rhetoric in Britain, Mr Tony Benn.

'The people' have always figured prominently in Mr Benn's speeches, in such statements as, 'we must tell the British People the truth, trust the British People, and let the British People decide'.²⁰ It is easy to show, however, that he uses the term very ambiguously, moving readily from one sense to another. The most striking examples can be found in *Arguments for Democracy*, in which 'the people' begins as the whole political

¹⁹ Those connoisseurs of diplomatic vagueness, the drafters of United Nations declarations, maintain in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that all 'peoples' (rather than 'nations') have the right to self-determination. (J. A. Joyce, *The New Politics of Human Rights*, London, Macmillan, 1978, p. 58.)

²⁰ *Speeches by Tony Benn*, Nottingham, Spokesman Books, 1974, p. 116.

community but ends as working-class Labour voters. Mr Benn says at the start that the book is intended 'for those of us who want to see the people of this country take control of our own destinies'. There is nothing here to suggest any exclusions, and the impression that he is talking about the whole nation is strengthened a couple of pages later when he admits that 'until the people as a whole can be brought to see that we alone have the capacity to shape our own destiny, nothing real can be achieved'.²¹

So far, it appears that 'the people' means the whole political community, the British nation. However, the people soon starts to shrink. The first to go are the members of the Establishment, who still rule the people of Britain as the 'last colony in the British Empire'. 'The people' now, it seems, means the remainder of the population, needing only to mobilize against the Establishment to free themselves, for 'there is no power on earth that can stop a determined people'. This impression is misleading, however, for a little later 'the people' shrinks again, this time to 'working people' as represented in the Labour movement, contrasted not only with the Establishment but with the middle classes as well.²²

What Mr Benn does, in other words, is to shift between different images of society, playing upon the ambiguities of 'people' in order to do so. Sometimes the picture he evokes is of a whole nation, united except for the quislings in the Establishment, marching single-mindedly and democratically to its goal. At other times, what we find ourselves witnessing is the struggle of the working class, i.e. 'working people', versus both Establishment and middle class. On the whole, he tends to use the integrative sense when his theme is the need for an increase in democracy – 'the sovereignty of the people as a whole' – and 'working people' when his concern is with socialist issues of redistribution. The advantage of this vagueness is that it avoids awkward political problems about class conflict and the relationship between socialist ends and democratic means: for when 'the people as a whole'

²¹ T. Benn, *Arguments for Democracy*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1981, pp. xi–xiii.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 17, 38, 103. On occasion, 'the people' can shrink still further. Mr Benn is reported to have claimed that Arthur Scargill was 'the authentic voice of the British people'. (*The Observer*, 29 November 1981.)

take control of their own destiny, they will of course organize society in the people's interest, and the question of who is likely to gain or lose in such a process can be left imprecise.

Although the dilemmas of democratic socialism may make populist evasions particularly tempting, Mr Benn has no monopoly of rhetorical sleight of hand. The point which he illustrates is simply that the rhetorical language of the people is a matter of constantly fluctuating meanings, with 'the people' in question at one moment shrinking to a section of the population, at another expanding to include the nation or even all people everywhere.²³

POPULISM AND THE PEOPLE

The discussion so far has, I hope, established that 'people' is a term to be treated with considerable caution. It is very often used in politics not to convey a definite meaning or to express a specific standpoint, but rather because it provides a conveniently ambiguous language into which political positions can be translated by propagandists who want to attract one another's supporters. 'The people', in other words, is a concept tailor-made for catch-all politics, and analysis of its use can easily turn into a study in the pathology of modern democratic politics, or how to talk nonsense to the greatest political effect.

This is not the end of the matter, however, for there is another side to 'the people', another implication of its ambiguities that could easily be obscured by too much concentration on the activities of politicians. The very malleability and range of resonance that is so convenient for the politician also makes it an ideal term of political protest: an ideal concept in terms of which neglected grievances can be expressed, and to which those who suffer an obscure sense of oppression can appeal. In other words, as well as being a manipulative device, 'people' can also articulate genuine political concerns, which is one of the reasons why appeals in its terms can be so successful in attracting support.

²³ This accounts for one of the peculiarities of radical populist rhetoric, the fact that 'the people' seem to be both weak and strong. One moment they are the underdogs, poor inoffensive creatures, constantly oppressed; the next, they are the mighty army of humanity against which no oppressor can stand.

Since the notion is one that is richly ambiguous and charged with emotive connotations not only in English but in many other languages, we should not be surprised that the causes using this most adaptable of rallying cries should have been extremely various. The articulation of neglected grievances in terms of the language of 'the people' is, in fact, precisely what the many different identifiable versions of populism have in common,²⁴ and because it relies so much on rhetorical traditions that vary from one cultural context to another, populism necessarily takes different forms in different places. There are, it is true, certain characteristic rhetorical motifs that link themselves to 'the people' in many of its different translations, notably the revolt of the underdog 'people' against an elite, and the unity of the national 'people' against enemies without and divisions within. Even these common themes, however, take different forms as they are elaborated in the context of different traditions and different patterns of linguistic usage. Populism, therefore, is culturally specific.

Although there are few generalizations that can safely be made about populism as such, however, it may be possible to be a good deal more specific about the political attitudes that lend themselves to expression in populist language at a particular time and place – in modern Britain, for example. 'People' may have several different meanings, but that is not to say that it can mean just anything. As we have seen, its various senses can be used as tactical weapons by politicians with axes to grind: but what of less manipulative approaches to 'the people'? If we examine the term's connotations in modern Britain, we shall find that certain political views link themselves naturally with its various senses to form a characteristic cluster of attitudes. In spite of the apparent inconsistencies between the different meanings of 'people', these attitudes add up to a reasonably coherent general picture of the political world that has very widespread appeal, and that differs from any offered by the available articulate and organized political groupings. We are justified in calling this world view 'populist' not only because it corresponds to what is usually labelled as such in modern British politics, but also, on more secure

²⁴ See M. Canovan, *Populism*, and 'Two Strategies for the Study of Populism', *Political Studies*, XXX, 4, December 1982.

analytical grounds, because its focus is 'the people' in its various contemporary connotations.

The first element in this modern British populist outlook, corresponding to the sense of 'people' as the whole nation, is a craving for unity. While this may well be an instinctive human response and a fundamental datum of political psychology, within a populist context it is supported and sanctioned by the conviction that the people are one. This legitimizes hostility to factions, particularly to those which openly represent particular classes and segments of the population, and generates a responsiveness to unifying movements. Linked to this is a willingness to accept a single leader of the single people. In normal times this craving is satisfied by the British monarchy, but the same feelings were evoked in an intensified form by Mrs Thatcher's performance as Britannia at the time of the Falklands crisis. Populist hostility to divisions may even have latent within it a certain distrust of anything as complex and splintered as the democratic process itself: less speculatively, the longing for internal unity within the people is connected with anti-internationalism abroad and a dislike of outsiders at home. The image of the 'one people', with all its connotations of common roots and common traditions, is hard to reconcile with a plural, multi-ethnic society, so that among the characteristically populist attitudes in Britain we must count hostility to immigrants of different race or culture.

So far, the modern British populist may simply sound like an old-fashioned Conservative, but to identify the two would be to neglect the second element in the package, derived from the sense of 'people' as underdogs. This corresponds to a profound, though diffuse, hostility to hierarchy. 'The people' in this sense are those who are *not* rich or highly-educated, not Whitehall mandarins or MPs. They are the 'ordinary people'. At the same time, however, they are conscious of being the sovereign people of democracy, courted and flattered by politicians when election time comes round, and a variety of (mostly negative) attitudes flow from their view of themselves. They are, for example, resentful of experts and intellectuals who claim to know better than they do, especially about subjects on which they feel perfectly competent to judge (such as their children's education). They tend to be suspicious

of bureaucrats, politicians and leaders in general, since these must in the nature of things become removed from the under-dogs. The leaders who will best attract their loyalty are those who have the common touch, who seem like 'ordinary people' in their opinions and tastes – just as the royal family are loved for their ordinariness as well as their ceremonial glamour.

As John Clemens has recently pointed out, the development of opinion polling has given a considerable boost to populist anti-elitism.²⁵ Polls enable the unorganized 'ordinary people' to know what they as a group think, and sometimes draw attention to embarrassing differences between majority views in the country and those favoured within the Establishment. One obvious response in this situation is for the 'ordinary people' to favour a referendum, a political device particularly congenial to populism.

Up to a point, populist anti-elitism overlaps with left-wing class-consciousness, but it is not the same thing. 'The people' do not think of themselves as a class but as the vast majority of the population – perhaps the whole nation minus certain parasites. Left-wing traditions of class conflict are too openly divisive for the populist, while the internationalism and elitist intellectualism of the Left also serve to distinguish the two political outlooks. There are differences over trade unions as well. Populists may well resent riches and dislike big business, but they are not fond of established unions either, partly because they may be seen as divisive groups opposed to the national interest, and also because they are large, elitist, impersonal organizations that may seem out of touch with the ordinary man. A populist will therefore sympathize equally with the struggle of ordinary workers against the closed shop, and with the efforts of 'the Polish people' to gain union representation against the Party.

The stress on the ordinariness of 'ordinary people' is linked to the third element in modern British populism, corresponding to the sense in which 'people' means simply human beings, anyone and everyone. In this sense, Shirley Williams's title,

²⁵ John Clemens, *Polls, Politics and Populism*, Aldershot, Gower, 1983. Clemens's book is not only about 'populism' (by which he understands, in essence, government in accordance with the people's wishes as expressed in opinion polls): it is itself a manifesto of anti-elitist populism.

Politics is for People,²⁶ would be the ideal populist slogan, though she herself is too liberal and socialist to be much of a populist. The emphasis here is squarely upon the personal: upon warm human values, family life, 'small is beautiful', *gemeinschaft*, in contrast to the inhuman aspects of modern existence symbolized by large organizations and computers. Many populist movements have connected similar sentiments with an idealization of rural life and a generalized distrust of towns and modernization. In modern Britain, where the vast majority of the population has been urban for generations, this is not a plausible option, but perhaps it would not be entirely fanciful to suggest that the contemporary equivalent of the peasant or farmer of so much populist myth is the suburban gardener, living a blameless and authentic life among his dahlias.²⁷

Be that as it may, for the populist it is *people* that are important rather than institutions or ideals. There are similarities here with the liberal concern for human dignity, except that in place of liberal individualism and delight in diversity there is a craving for normality, a stress on the ordinariness of 'ordinary people' and on their similarities rather than their differences. Just as populists see the nation as naturally one people, so they also tend to assume that all 'ordinary, decent people' share much the same views.²⁸ These views are conformist rather than pluralistic, traditional rather than trendy. Populists do not necessarily hold values that are literally reactionary, but as 'ordinary people' they could hardly be in the vanguard of progress, and they tend to lag behind elite thinking on such matters as homosexuality and capital punishment.

When combined, therefore, the connotations of 'people' in modern Britain lead us to a political world-view that is reasonably coherent and undoubtedly popular. It has far too little intellectual content to be called an ideology, and the picture of the political world it provides is distinct in some areas

²⁶ S. Williams, *Politics is for People*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1981.

²⁷ The recent suggestion, in a gardening periodical, that unemployment and crime could be reduced at a stroke by setting the young jobless to tend Britain's neglected gardens, has the sort of earnest, commonsensical dottiness so often attributed to populist economic nostrums.

²⁸ An assumption which has an eerie similarity to the unanimity of all rational men assumed by respected neo-Kantian philosophers like Rawls and Habermas.

but very blurred in others. Where economic policy is concerned, for example, one can infer that a populist will focus upon the concerns of ordinary people, such as jobs, old age pensions, health care, low taxes and owner-occupied houses, but there is no specifically populist set of policies for looking after these. The populist will certainly be hostile both to impersonal economic forces and to elite manipulations: especially perhaps to the foreign, elitist, bureaucratic and computerized directives of the EEC.²⁹ Resistance to metrication and the defence of doorstep milk deliveries are good populist causes, but intimations of more positive policies are lacking.

Populism, then, is culturally specific, and the particular combination of political attitudes that makes up the populist world-view in contemporary Britain differs from any of the more sophisticated political standpoints on offer, though elements of populism can be found in the policies of all the various parties. Perhaps the party that has come nearest to articulating the whole package is the National Front, but neither this nor its rivals has ever been simply a populist party. Instead, extreme and eccentric attitudes and behaviour have made them much too lacking in respectability to pose convincingly as representatives of 'ordinary people'.

In spite of the absence of a modern British populist movement, it is important to recognize that populism remains latent in British politics. The democratic slogans inseparable from elections periodically encourage the electorate to think of themselves as 'the people', and when they do so, the term's associations bring a specifically populist picture of politics before their minds. The result is an underground reservoir of populist feelings. As I argued earlier, this is periodically tapped by politicians of all parties for their own purposes, but most of them find the notion of 'the people' useful without actually taking it seriously. Perhaps the exception is Mrs Thatcher. If she continues to include populist elements in her strategy, then populism in general and the notion of 'the people' in particular may begin to be taken more seriously by political scientists and political philosophers. It is certainly high time that populism's key concept was subjected to the kind of detailed critical analysis that it has so far escaped.

²⁹ See Harry Lazer's illuminating article on 'British Populism: The Labour Party and the Common Market Parliamentary Debate', *op. cit.*