

The Abuse of the Concept of “Populism”*

Prabhat Patnaik

All regimes based on class antagonism require a discourse to legitimise class oppression and this discourse in turn requires a vocabulary of its own. The neoliberal regime too has developed its own discourse and vocabulary and a key concept in this vocabulary is “populism”. This concept is given great currency by the media, which is peopled by members drawn from the upper middle class who have been major beneficiaries of the neo-liberal regime and have therefore developed a vested interest in its continuation. So pervasive is the reach of this concept that even well-meaning and progressive members of the literati have fallen victim to its abuse and employ the term with the pejorative connotation typically imparted to it by the corporate-owned media.

The term “populism” of course is not an invention of the neo-liberal intelligentsia. It has been used much earlier but with a meaning very different from what is given to it now. The Russian Narodniks for instance were called “populists” by Russian Marxists, including Lenin, but the term was used to denote the fact that the Narodniks did not make class distinctions within the mass that they indiscriminately called the “people”. The idea was not to discredit the use of the term “people”, for Lenin himself used the term “working people” to denote workers and peasants; it was to avoid the obliteration of distinctions among them which needed to be theoretically drawn. Under neo-liberalism, however, the term is used to refer to any appeal made to any segment of the working people, whether to mobilize them on grounds of religious chauvinism or by making fiscal transfers to them.

The term “populism” in its current use, therefore, covers both fascist and semi-fascist appeals to the people on issues that deliberately camouflage their oppression, as well as all attempts to secure some gains for them to alleviate their oppression. The former is sometimes called “Right-wing populism” while the latter is called “Left-wing populism”. The ideological obfuscation is obvious here: not only is there no class perspective behind the use of the term, but by treating both “Left-wing” and “Right-wing” populism on a par as unwholesome tendencies, there is a privileging of the “middle”, i.e., a liberal bourgeois position as the only “sensible” one. A concept used in a rigorous theoretical critique with regard to the cognition of a mass entity, as was the case with the Russian Marxists, has now been converted into an apotheosis of the liberal bourgeois position.

This is not just a case of obfuscation; it is positively misleading as well. The hallmark of the fascist, neo-fascist and semi-fascist positions that are labelled “Right-wing” populism is that they have nothing to offer by way of economic benefits to the masses. By contrast, what is called “Left-wing” populism demands welfare state measures, and, at the very least, economic transfers to the people; by putting the two on a par and debunking “populism” in general, the dominant discourse essentially debunks all economic transfers to the people. It, therefore, advances a position according to which any economic concessions made to the people must be eschewed and the government’s focus must be entirely on the growth of the GDP; since transfers to the people eat into resources that could have been used for making investments which would have accelerated growth, such transfers are a waste, made

under duress only because of electoral compulsions, but otherwise utterly unwise. An extension of this logic is the argument that any attempt on the part of the government to reduce economic inequality in society is also unwise.

This discourse is perfectly in keeping with a neo-liberal regime. Before it was introduced, nobody would have been critical if an agenda of reducing inequality and eliminating poverty had been advanced. In fact, Indira Gandhi won an election on the slogan of Garibi Hatao; of course, she did not do it, but the criticism against her was not that she advanced the slogan but that she did not do it. Amartya Sen had argued long ago that devoting just 5 per cent of GDP would eliminate poverty in India and that the country should do it by foregoing total consumption by an amount equal to just one year's GDP growth (which was then about 5 per cent per annum). Reduction in inequality and the elimination of poverty were thus considered primary tasks before the economy during the dirigiste period; but not so now, even though there has been a massive increase in income and wealth inequality under the neo-liberal regime. And recourse to the pejorative use of the term "populism" is a means of debunking all such demands for greater egalitarianism, an ideological weapon in the hands of corporate capital and the burgeoning upper middle class to beat down all proposals for economic transfers to the poor.

Prioritising economic growth has always been a feature of bourgeois economics, but with a difference. Adam Smith had argued for the removal of state interference that, he believed, stood in the way of economic growth, even though he knew perfectly well that the benefits of this growth would not come to the working class. In his view an increase in the wealth of the nation was an important goal per se; where he differed from his predecessors was in arguing that this wealth consisted not in the acquisition of gold and silver but in the accumulation of capital stock that could be used for producing goods. David Ricardo too was all for the accumulation of capital stock and hence for the growth of output, even though he knew that there was a limit to such accumulation. (Indeed, Karl Marx had lauded Ricardo for advocating accumulation even though the latter believed that such accumulation would run into a cul-de-sac when what was called a stationary state was reached). Ricardo also believed that the working class would not be benefitted by such accumulation.

The reason why both Smith and Ricardo thought that the working class would not be benefitted by such accumulation is because any improvement in its condition tended to bring forth an increase in its population. The only way that workers could benefit from capital accumulation, therefore, was if they restricted their propensity to procreate. But that was a matter that they alone could influence, though the classical economists were in favour of their becoming better off through restricting their population growth. The classical advocacy of growth however was independent of whether workers benefitted from it.

The current advocacy of growth is different. Nobody today believes that the conditions of the working people are miserable because they procreate too much; nobody believes that their conditions cannot be improved through the efforts of the State by bringing about income transfers in their favour. And yet such transfers are sought to be avoided by neo-liberal bourgeois economists on the grounds that they would jeopardise economic growth. The classical advocacy of growth is taken over by modern neo-liberals, but without the classical economists' sympathy for the working

class. Thus, the bourgeoisie's class animosity against the working class is now reflected in the attitudes of the economists as well.

The emphasis on growth to the exclusion of economic transfers to the poor, which are sneeringly labelled as "populist measures", is doubly offensive to the poor. On the one hand it prevents an improvement in their living standard that could have been achieved if the transfers had taken place; on the other hand, the quest for growth invariably involves a number of projects that entail the ousting of peasants and labourers from the land that they cultivate, and of people at large from their habitats, which leaves them even worse off than they were to start with. True, employment is created on such projects and also in downstream activities created by them; but the displaced are scarcely the beneficiaries from such employment generation, and even the employment that is created often falls short of the employment that is destroyed. And rehabilitation of the displaced people that is promised when the project is undertaken is scarcely ever realised. If growth was being effected under the aegis of collectives of the people themselves, through for instance peasant collectives themselves starting industrial projects, then matters would be different; but that is not the way that growth occurs under capitalism.

The debunking of welfare state measures by referring to them pejoratively as "populist", and emphasising GDP growth exclusively as the objective of state policy, are cynically anti-people; but that is the hallmark of neo-liberalism.

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