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populism, public education, and a short look at the war

Juergen Oelkers

For the use as an analytical concept, 'populism' means strategic simplification in discourse and decision-making. In this article, populism is treated as a threat to democracy. Autocratic political systems are using populist rhetoric and/or propaganda for their aim of repression as is shown with a look at the Ukrainian war. Finally, the article is concerned with the future need for qualitative education in democratic societies. This cannot be done with populist concepts in education itself.

Keywords: democracy, education, populism, populist education, Ukranian war

1. Populism

If one is dealing with the subject of public education in a liberal democracy, one must use a language that reaches the public at large and does not confuse them with specialist and technical terminology, in other words a language that is *popular* that can be understood and used by citizens (Miller & Oelkers, 2022). The term 'popular' is not the same as the term 'populist'. Popular means that something or somebody is liked, in demand, and accepted by the majority of a country's population, without having to be political. Populism is often used as a political battle cry, and this happens in two ways. On the one hand, it is about the suppressed voice of the people which should be expressed against the 'mainstream' of public opinion. On the other hand, 'populism' denotes the side of an argument that deserves contempt. 'Populists' are always those who must be shunned because they dramatically simplify complex problems and thus have no consideration for education. In this sense, 'populism' would be at the same time criticism *by* the elites (of the people and their lack of education) and criticism *of* the elites (their arrogance towards the people) (Oelkers, 2022).

Populism is often associated with political movements, and there it adopts various facets. Descriptively, it points to major movements such as the 'yellow vests' (gilets jaunes) in France, medially, it is about establishing convictions with suggestive messages on one's own channels if possible and, politically, it means a call for resistance against the establishment, which is often associated with missions. Political movements are often public expressions of protest and, in this sense, indispensable for democracy. The protest is usually aimed at clearly identifiable injustices like the rampant corruption in South America, the economic decline of whole regions in the United States, or – as long as protest was still possible – the increasing influence of the People's Republic of China over Hong Kong. If people are not heard by existing authorities, they will seek other ways of getting attention. The best example are the world-wide protests against climate change.

'Populism' also describes efforts to give such movements an ideological superstructure, often giving rise to a Manichaean world of 'good and evil' view with which anger and hatred can be articulated.

Otherwise, the precarious experience would have no voice while extreme political parties try to persuade voters and adapt their language of the street for their own purposes. This is also not new and can hardly be avoided; democracy is not a philosophical seminar but a struggle for power that takes people to the streets in certain situations and can lead to uprisings. Then a radical simplification of all problems and solutions is propagated in public, boiling down to a separation between 'us' and 'them'. But that alone is not enough. The rhetoric of political movements always contains references to 'the people', intended to guise their own particularity. When movements are given power, even quite democratically, they try to translate as much of their own radicalism into politics as possible, and always 'in the name of the people'.

2. Populism, Education and Democracy

Presupposing this – is there also 'populism' in education? The association between democracy and general education was justified by the need to counteract the primacy of the *vox populi* and the 'mob' (*Pöbel*), but only after the discovery of natural law and of the realisation that the people were the addressees of education. Previously, the vox populi was often synonymous with belief in miracles, religious fanaticism, social outrage, or rigid exclusion without being discursive. Anyone who wishes to educate the people must consider the mob surmountable.[1] Hence, the education of citizens is the great pedagogical programme of the Enlightenment. Citizens communicate and influence public opinion, which does not arise spontaneously on the street but is based on arguments that are called to appear before the high court of reason. At least that is how philosophers such as Immanuel Kant or Jürgen Habermas thought of the ideal of the political public sphere. The public consists of citizens and not of subjects, and citizens have to be educated. But a public in action is not the mirror of its ideal. Public arenas are stages for public strife, clashes of opinion, and highly ritual communication, not just the exchange of arguments. These stages are also used by those described as 'populists'. If one wishes to argue with them, one must ensure that they can speak out in public. This also applies, and especially so, when they are regarded as dangerous. One can state this in public without suppressing public opinion. The public must judge how harmless or how dangerous an opinion is. Objection is always possible, as long as the rules are set by public opinion and various opinions are at play. This applies only to times of peace. A war alters the entire setting of communication and also the extent to which it remains liberal. But even in times of peace public communication is limited.

In the eyes of many critics, 'populism' is the same as impermissible simplification, but that would make a lot of politicians 'populists'. Differentiation is a requirement for analysis, but not for political publicity which often is supposed to shape opinions by means of suggestion. Political voting actually appears as the most radical simplification, i.e. the choice between only one 'either' and only one 'or'. A hubris is created when a singular political opinion is considered to express the genuine opinion of the people, while in fact this only serves the followers of a group or milieu. But the supporters can easily believe they are on the side of the previously concealed truth if the leaders know how to successfully sway their opinions.

The historical pattern of this strategy is the political use of Rousseau's *volonté générale* explicated in his Social Contract (1762) before and during the French Revolution which was meant to express the will of the people and not simply that of the majority of the people. Since then, any 'leader' can claim to represent the general will with his person and politics. In populist strategies the people are often played against the political elites, usually with the remark that the elites have lost contact with the people and care only about themselves. This is popular and credible for many voters. That is

how Donald Trump conducts his permanent election campaign. But nothing ever follows from the suspicion of elitist 'self-service'. Elites do not disappear after an election victory, and only certain people at the top are replaced. This represents the Don Quixote-problem. You can fight windmills without ever meeting them. During the run-up to power, politicians attempt to win over public opinion with catchy slogans. For instance, the 'Five Stars Movement' (*Movimento 5 Stelle*: M5S) in Italy won the 2018 elections with the slogan 'honesty before experience'. This was supposed to display a radical change in which hopes had been placed earlier, but it did not last longer than the election campaign.

But why are such strategies for winning over voters not only possible but also successful if the people's standard of education grows at the same time and no one can evade the maxims of popular education? Education should encourage the application of reason, but despite all its ideals it has never assumed a uniform effect, especially not in the form of schools. Also, reason does not radiate from itself. And, according to ideals, a democratic citizen is free to form his own opinions, even if third persons can call this the effect of 'manipulations'. On the other hand, 'education' is a central field for today's populism in the sense that subjective convictions assume the nature of immovable truths, parochial identities set the tone, or the concernment and anxieties of individuals dictates the decisions of institutions. This is evidenced by various strategies, whose common denominator is that it is not primarily science that should shape education but political movements, religious beliefs, or the needs of the individuals (Musto, 2021).

3. Strategies of Populism in Public Education

A political strategy of populism in education is geared to the national curriculum and has left-wing and right-wing variants. This means continuous attempts to remove the theory of evolution from biology lessons or to put it into relative perspective, but one is also concerned with different versions of history teaching, language policy, the canon of school literature or sex education, which pose a provocation to the self-conception of, for instance, national conservative or Evangelical groups. Not least because of this do they seek close contact with autocrats.

The strategy of the politicisation of education occurs not only on the right-hand side of the political spectrum. Language policy occupies centre stage whenever there are calls for a symbolic recognition of minorities, while revisions of history tend to alter those parts of the social and cultural past, in other words established historiography, that are stigmatised as 'racist' or 'colonialist'. This is scientifically necessary and should of course have an impact on the curriculum. However, public discussion is often beset with populist anger that oppose any differentiation. This also applies to gender issues insofar as they are linked to strong beliefs and rigorous morality. It seeks and exploits the public but at the same time invalidates a basic principle, the principle of mutual recognition. The school then becomes an arena and eventually a battlefield.

This could also be observed during the course of the Covid-19 pandemic (2020–2022). During this period, there were serious disputes in schools and elsewhere in education between the opponents and supporters of compulsory vaccination. On both sides, the focus was on the welfare of the child. For this reason, no compromises were tolerated, and the disputes often caused families to become estranged. Covid-19 has also enforced conspiracy theories, showing once again how quickly reason and considered judgment can disappear. Crises like these can lend force to paranoid trends in the public system of beliefs (Suthaharan et al., 2021; similar findings appear in the Basel study by Kahn et al., 2021). Another example for public paranoia is the QAnon saga of conspiracy in which

children are the victims of a secret elite of paedophiles that exists only in narratives but fuelled believers to be taken as facts (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021). In such cases, one does not seek a better argument, but a position with immovable principles that are exchanged in a climate of confrontation and often hostility. 'Learning' then is reduced to mere confirmation, and 'discussion' would at most become the persuasion of adversaries. The point is to be right against every kind of objections that all are taken to be unjustified and thus eliminate the correcting public.

A second populist strategy in education that is becoming more prevalent is related to this. It regards teaching in schools and universities in need of a 'safe space' and aims to prevent mental harm by means of 'trigger warnings'. The safe space is provided by the very institutions against which there are warnings or who issue warnings about certain topics themselves. In the world of social media, it became easy to emotionalise politics, propagate election struggles without end and introduce Manichaean decision-making principles, or on a personal level lend expression to anger and disappointment that can be tamed and civilized only with difficulty or not at all. If democracy, in the sense of Dewey, is a mode of trustful communication, then democracy played against itself. In any case, education alone is no guarantee for better politics and apparently no guarantee for restraint, as can be seen for example in today's language crusades in which unpopular words or opinions are placed under suspicion and branded because they are suspected of being able to launch personal discrimination, and eventually do so. Liberal universities in particular have succumbed to this and are faced with the problem of subjecting public discussions to censorship that does not arise from political power but is triggered by personal concern that one cannot contradict. How someone feels, whether discriminated against or not, cannot be corrected with arguments, also or precisely because there is a language for this that can only be authoritative. And psychological 'concern' is outside rational education and thus intellectually unconditional.

The concept of a pedagogical 'safe space' goes back to Rousseau's *Emile* (1762) and is based on the premise that children require protection for their own good. What Rousseau had in mind were the dangers posed by society, especially in comparison with others. The child must avoid comparison until – as a man – he is strong enough to sustain it. The learning space is 'safe' because the child can focus only on itself and its nature, nurtured by a tutor who can concentrate entirely on its upbringing. What Rousseau thought for children can have fatal consequences for adults if the pedagogical safe space contradicts the freedom of learning and opens the door to a new kind of censorship that casts not only everything communicated in education into doubt but cancelled everything that could be harmful. Defence and reluctance are conditioned as friendly protection from excessive demands, instead of trusting the sovereign judgment of the learner. The reason is frequently the populist dissolution of borders of the psychological trauma theory[2] and the protection of an identity which tolerates no overload and which anyone can adopt for himself. Epistemic authorities behind the strategy of protection remain anonymous, and instead of encouraging critical thinking (see the articles in Bernecker, Flowerree & Grundmann, 2021), they hinder it because the safe space, with constantly fresh warnings, can become a permanent phenomenon. Rousseau's idea, a safe space just for the development of children, was a problem, too, because it is based on well-intentioned supervision and can filter out experience so that only the approved plan of 'natural education' is applied. This again is unassailable because it is assumed to follow 'nature', which everyone might believe but which no one can prove in what space of education ever.

Another strategy of populist education is politically retrograde and, in turn, recognises various elements advocated by right-wing and evangelical authors, also appear in identitarian movements and are mostly linked by the assumption of a homogeneous people, which is said to have existed in

earlier times but is now threatened and is meant to be salvaged through a 'new' education. These features include a return to unquestionable authority at school and at home, strictness and discipline as educational values, a dismantling of democratisation, a devaluation of dialogue and discussion, and even the duty of upbringing based on creed or race. It is a mistake to assume that all this lies in the past (Giudici, 2021; Peters & Besley, 2020; especially on the effects of the internet: Watson & Barnes, 2021).

Authoritarian concepts like these can always be renewed in public debates and merely wait for a suitable forum of acceptance. This is a kind of muffled populism that comes out into the open as soon as the right opportunity arises. What is decisive is who is believed in the public space on the basis of what arguments or evidence and how majorities emerge. And whenever there is mention of 'populism', the level of education alone makes no difference (Brühwiler & Goktepe, 2021). It is also becoming clear today that the western concept of a liberal education free of tuition that was distributed after World War II has never had global respect and has even been debated inside democracies. One needs only to consider the market orientation and steady indebtedness of studies in the United States where state funding of public education has always been strongly opposed and the freedom of schools strongly supported. Also, authoritarian concepts of religious upbringing never disappeared there. The restoration of religious undertones to the educational system represents a further populist trend that is spreading massively outside the United States. This has not yet affected Protestant Central Europe, but it certainly has affected Catholic countries like Hungary and Poland as well as countries like Russia, Turkey, and India, i.e. countries with a strictly secular public education that is being increasingly pushed back, to the applause of various parental groups (Oelkers, 2018).

The arguments employed there reconnect church and state, are nationalist in tone, and reject any liberal theology. Also, there is frequent reference to history of national opposition, such as the opposition of Orthodox churches to the spread of Catholicism in Russia or the salvaging of Catholic identity against the Reformation in Poland. Therefore, the nation and the national unity of the people are the key pedagogical point of reference, and even when these histories are unsustainable, they can be told in schools as tales meant for education. In his *Esprit des loix* (1748), Montesquieu assumed that the form of government creates the laws that govern education, not vice versa. According to this logic, democratic upbringing can only exist in a democracy. There need not be a 'nation' in the 19th Century sense, nor does it have to be a national education which only developed with the French Revolution. But there are increasing cases that do not fit into any firm category but assume a hybrid shape; countries like Russia that are formally a democracy but are assuming increasingly authoritarian characteristics reminiscent of a totalitarian monarchy and either do not require liberal public opinion or deliberately neutralise it. Education for society then becomes gradually authoritarian, and there is no room for corrections because criticism lost its voice and became unheard.

4. The War in the Ukraine

The war in Ukraine[3] has turned Russian populist tales of historical greatness and religious *grandeur* into a media state education that tolerates no opposition and punishes any deviations. Russia has finally become a sort of fascist state that is seemingly able to convince the majority of its citizens that it is waging war against 'Nazis'. They also should believe that it is a 'just' war intended to reinstall Russia's greatness. Appropriately in the middle of the war, the Russian Duma decided to re-introduce a state youth organisation based on the model of the Soviet pioneers to serve the 'patriotic

education' of young children. The Russian President is said to be at the head of this organisation. The 'Lenin Pioneers' were founded in 1922 and emerged from the Russian scout movement. Heroic-military pedagogy is indebted to Russian educator Anton Makarenko who is still revered in the West. 'Patriotic education' has been a compulsory subject in Russian state schools for years. Paramilitary 'cadet classes' are considered a special incentive for learning and even formations with the 'Z' symbol of the war are being created in early education institutions. Special handbooks have been produced for teachers with which to justify the 'special operation'. In some schools, fallen soldiers are revered with 'hero school desks' (Hartwich, 2022).

This war is a war of annihilation in which the Ukrainians as the renegade 'brother people' have been declared the 'enemy' whose state has to be extinguished. Anyone who wants people to believe something like this must indoctrinate the political convictions of the people and combine them with patriotic emotions that can only be delivered by creating grand narratives of extreme danger, impending doom, and ultimate salvation. This can only be achieved by a leader behind whom the people should gather. He 'educates' the people. Stalin was the great educator of the Russian people in the first national anthem of the Soviet-Union (1943) which superseded 'The Internationale'. There the people should fight for themselves and against the authorities.[4] Now the will to destruct turned outside. But the aggressor in this war is clear and indisputable, except among Russia's allies. From the first day on, Ukraine's media strategy stressed that the Russian invasion is a foray with only one aim, namely to destroy the democratic order and to annex the country. To get that straight, Ukraine's media are not in need of an ideology based on religion or narratives of a glorious imperial past.

The president as the speaker of the government addresses directly to the people, independent witnesses are allowed to speak, and the military situation is not a mystery apart from protecting the own soldiers. Every war narrative creates heroes, but they must be trusted without any suspicion of cheap lies. New media are of great help not only because everyone can be addressed but also because everyone can use the net of communication in a state of national emergency. Other than the Russian side which interdicts free communication, this strategy seems to be credible and is not regarded as pure propaganda.[5] But the war experience is primarily one of massive military destruction that has had immediate consequences for the education of children. In a press release dated 31 May 2022, UNICEF drew attention to the fact that 3 million children have had to flee within Ukraine since the beginning of the war and that over 2.2 million have escaped to neighbouring countries. More than two children are killed and more than four are injured daily in the war zones (UNICEF, 2022).

For the children left behind, the Russian attacks make normal teaching impossible. The children suffer genuine trauma. Their 'safe space' were bunkers, cellars, and underground railway tunnels. For those who escaped, 'safe spaces' are uncertain camps, accommodation with families who often need help themselves, or schools in countries whose languages they do not understand. Ukrainian citizens in the war zones have a clear opinion about why they are opposing and fighting the Russian aggressor. The reason is all to do "so that our children can live in their own land, in Ukraine, not in Russia" (Judah, 2022, n.p.). What is meant by 'land' is a country that succeeded in separating itself from the heritage of the Soviet Union and has developed independently, which also applies to education.

5. Liberal Democracy and Future Education

For liberal democracy, the experience of war could be an opportunity to reflect on the principles of its education against all populist trends. The debate about the dangers of digitisation or the subjectification of universities (Foucault's and Judith Butler's term; see Davies, 2006) cannot hide the fact that the real danger to education comes from authoritarian systems as in Russia and China, where they have established themselves and gained support. Digitisation also harbours dangers for public education. When one trusts only oneself and can communicate positively only with like-minded people, arguments cannot remedy convictions, they can only reinforce them. A dispute among democrats would be meaningless unless they want to talk cross-purposes and exchange messages for their own supporters that can develop into hate. But every citizen can notice this, keep quiet or make their choice of message elsewhere. This freedom always exists and exploiting it requires intellectual capacity, strength of judgement, and scepticism towards totalitarian temptations; in other words, it requires education that tests opinions and can also set itself apart from them. But this education is no longer protected by itself, in other words by a culture of toleration that lays down what can be said and what cannot.

In an area where no counter-criticism needs be tolerated, anyone can propagate obvious political nonsense and even worse topics like racism, phony war heroism, and religious hatred without being criticised, because one does not have to listen to the other side or can block his ears, which can also be achieved by simply switching to a different medium. Since the Enlightenment, criticism has been particularly effective when it can be linked to facts, but when facts are merely part of a world view or some other 'narrative', no criticism will achieve anything. Criticism requires a willingness to learn and curiosity about the other side; no political public sphere can stand up to a closed, often hostile world, at least not in its deliberative form and constitution.

A critical question is how long a time of war allows this and for whom. The Ukrainian war, similar to World War II, does not allow neutrality and forces a decision on what side one is on. But that is only tolerable as long as it does not override the principles of the democratic public and thus of a fair and equal public education, whatever the outcome might be. One task following this war is to re-assess what purpose public education still serves or for what purpose it is still needed. Without political public opinion, there would be no room for educational code words such as 'maturity' or 'critical ability', and the question is what effects the shift of public opinion will have on education.

Anyone looking for answers is traditionally referred to the use of 'education', in other words accepting problems, analysing them, and considering solutions, while respecting the limits of tolerance. If someone sees no problems or fails to relate to them, he cannot learn, but a problem can be perceived in simple or assumptive terms, depending on which horizon of understanding it encounters. Therefore, the creation, expansion, and long-term guarantee of social education with specialist institutions is and remains a cornerstone of modern democracy. The political ability to judge requires substantial education, and therefore self-reflection and sovereignty in handling arguments.

The more or less standardised school systems of education will continue to provide the basis for the quality of education in the future. It is about the basics of general education, which can only be acquired once and on which further education depends. Democracy as a social form is geared to participation *in* and influence *on* public affairs, and therefore co-existence in society. Schools can and should prepare for this, even when or because the locations of democratic experience can and must be diversified. But the school educates with the state's authority, and in this sense it does so inclusively. No child is excluded, which means that education yields a diversified crop.

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Jürgen Oelkers

Prof. em. Dr. Dr. h.c. Jürgen Oelkers (born 1947) is Emeritus for 'Allgemeine Pädagogik' at the University of Zürich. Mail: oelkers@ife.uzh.ch

1. See Boas (2020) for a larger history of the vox populi.
2. Trigger warnings do not help individuals with trauma histories (Jones, Bellet & McNally, 2020).
3. My observations about the war for this article are valid up to the middle of June 2020.
4. Ни бог, ни царь и не герой! No God, no Tsar and no Hero (The Internationale Russian, 2nd verse).
5. I owe this information to my talks with Jan Oelkers.