

Contemporary Populism and the Crisis of Late Liberalism: Notes from India

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Abstract

Contemporary populists depend on the rhetorical charge of the people as a mass, and, with bait-and-switch, present a select class of individuals as the real bearer of rights. They productively use the binary opposition between individuals who constitute the people, and the people as a mass or collective agent. This is an issue that pertains to politics as well as to media; the contradictions of late liberalism are both technological and political. Ever-larger numbers of people are enmeshed in technological networks at nearly zero marginal cost, but with an insufficiently imagined collective ethos. Media markets seek to maximize the size of audiences, composed by serially linked individuals who then constitute a fictive mass. Meanwhile the idea of the people as a collective agent remains politically powerful but exists unmoored from any overarching political ideology, save perhaps of counterrevolution.

In this essay I argue that the inability to generate effective political responses to populism requires a self-analysis of late liberalism. If right-wing populism claims to stand for 'the people,' their opponents should go beyond a demographic or sociological to a political notion of the people. However, the implicit aversion to the thought of socialism disadvantages liberals and benefits their opponents, because the Cold War-era conventions and limits on discourse continue with no alternative political vision of the people forthcoming. The political contradiction that contemporary populism poses requires confronting the inevitability of 'commonism,' that is, some form of political collectivity that transcends liberal individualism, while being determined to transcend the tragic history of socialism.