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The contemporary dispute of "right-wing populism" and the liberal democratic consensus

Polarisation, conformism and asymmetry of debate

Introduction

The present paper addresses the contemporary dispute over "right-wing populism" considered in terms of the determinants of strong polarisation of opinions clashing within it and their cognitive credibility. It also deals with the issue of the Western debate viewed from a long-term perspective, especially in terms of the controversy that has been stirred up by its key concepts of democracy and liberal order as well as the authoritative nature of Whig historiography, i.e. a modernist approach to the origins of Western freedom.

This contribution will discuss the following points. The divergence of opinions on "right-wing populism" is significantly related to the lack of agreement on the concept of democracy and the status of the liberal doctrine in contemporary politics. The cognitive competence and the mode of argumentation used by supporters of "right-wing populism" seem more credible than that of its critics. The reason for the cognitive defects of the criticism of "right-wing populism" is its close link with the prevailing view in the contemporary debate, which is expressed in approval of the hegemonic aspirations of the liberal mind.

In contemporary thought, the terms democracy and liberal democracy (liberal order) occupy a position that is superior to their explanatory power. They are used as tools of persuasion and agitation rather than factual analysis. Criticism of the defects of democracy has a long and respectable tradition but there is little room for it in mainstream contemporary discussion. Almost the same goes for the historical consciousness of the average Europeans and Americans affected by serious arguments employed by opponents of the modernist concept of the origins of Western freedom; their social reach seems to be limited.

Liberalism, with its privileges in public debate, weakens rather than strengthens the political consensus. This is, in a way, reflected in the fact that the discussion around the contestation movements that criticised the liberal democratic consensus and brought to power Donald Trump in the US, Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland and Viktor Orbán in Hungary is marked by a terminological asymmetry. That is, the stigmatising terms describing this contestation, such as "right-wing/authoritarian populism" or "new nationalism" (Pierzchalski, Rydliński 2017) have been coined by only one of the parties to the dispute. Its opponents acknowledge their well-established position in the contemporary debate, yet without theoretical satisfaction.

In addition, a few disclaimers need to be made. The claim formulated here on the hegemony of liberalism or the liberal mind can – in the eyes of many a commentator – be regarded as controversial. Critics of "right-wing populism" probably hold views that are fundamentally opposite to those of its followers as to which direction the pendulum of public opinion is swinging. This applies not only to the contemporary debate but also to previous ideological disputes. It could be said that conservative traditionalist concerns, e.g., those of Leo Strauss or Alaisdair MacIntyre about the fate of the *last bastions* of "Great Heritage" entrenched by the prevailing forces of "progressivism" (MacIntyre 1996; Strauss 1998), have almost always been accompanied by liberal or leftist fears, e.g., those of Isaiah Berlin or Richard Rorty (Berlin 1994; Rorty 1996) caused by "the recidivism of the forces of the dark past" posing a likely threat to the last outposts of "freedom" or "good taste". This almost eternal and thus, it would seem, trivial pattern in no way, in the author's view, diminishes the significance of divergent opinions that divide the participants in this kind of controversy.

Similar remarks would probably apply to the claim made in this article about the radical polarisation or even dichotomisation of contemporary political discourse. Arguably, it also deserves to be called debatable; however, it has many supporters including a sizeable portion of the defenders and accusers of "right-wing populism" quoted here, predominantly renowned scholars. The claim does not seem to deserve to be regarded as an intellectual provocation.

"Right-wing populism" in the eyes of its critics

Donald Trump and other "right-wing populists", as their accusers admit, have gained power because they have effectively capitalised on a rising tide of "anxiety, frustration and entirely legitimate resentment". This discontent re-

sults from capitalist globalisation and its effects, which have been going on for several decade, in the form of economic degradation, cultural uprooting and axiological confusion of a multitude of people worldwide. This tendency has been confirmed by Brexit as well as the successes of the National Front in France and the Law and Justice (PiS) party in Poland (Sandel 2021). The same kind of mass disillusionment with the consequences of "neoliberal global capitalism" also paved the way to power for Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Narendra Modi in India or Shinzō Abe in Japan (Bieber 2018a).

In other words, "right-wing populism" has effectively managed to harness legitimate and justifiable public opposition to an unquestionable belief in a variety of neoliberal global capitalism that has shaped public culture, creating a semantic vacuum, and taking away a sense of meaning, belonging and identity (Sandel 2021). In Sandel's view, the main culprits for the current state of affairs are not only Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher but also their left-wing successors, such as Bill Clinton, Tony Blair or Gerhard Schröder. Even though the latter three made some adjustments, they failed to challenge the main components of their predecessors' legacy (ibid).

Critics of "right-wing populism", regardless of the objections directed at it, do not deny its representatives political competence, that is, for example, the effective use of justifiable (after all) social anger. Moreover, they do not challenge the fact that it is not only right-wing but also left-wing politicians who should be blamed for the causes of neoliberal globalist evil. However, despite all these mitigating circumstances or observable virtues and rationales behind "right-wing populism", they define it, above all, in the disqualifying categories of fanatism and backwardness.

Whether in its Putinist or PiS guise, the above categories manifest themselves in, among other things, social conservatism, that is, apologetics for traditional and religious values, considered the proper arbiter of issues such as family policy, gender and sexuality, or immigration. They also subsume resentment toward elites and nationalism, marked by a "Manichean worldview" and an obsession with enemies (Bieber 2018a; Yatsyk 2019). The proponents of such views have an irresistible tendency to "stoke paranoia around foreign groups and dehumanise them". In 2018, when addressing the nation, Victor Orbán sounded the alarm that Hungary was being "invaded" by newcomers from other continents. Soon afterwards, the Hungarian parliament imposed punitive sanctions on humanitarian organisations that attempted to provide aid to undocumented migrants. In 2015, Jaroslaw Kaczynski warned his compatriots that refugees reaching Poland could carry infectious diseases via "various parasites and protozoa". Meanwhile, Donald Trump, launching his cam-

paign in 2015, thundered that Mexicans crossing the US border "bring drugs", "bring crime", and "are rapists" (Jenne 2018).

The phenomenon of populism has been subjected to in-depth and meticulous analyses. One of them, conducted on a sample of 152 candidates who participated in 73 election campaigns worldwide, resulted in the following findings: populists are at odds with "agreeableness, emotional stability and conscientiousness"; they also tend to be more prone to "narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism" than others (Nai, Martínez and Coma 2019). However, enquiries into populism can also reveal the fact that the concept of populism can sometimes be a handy tool that is excessively used to discredit a political or ideological opponent. Some of these studies indicate that the use of this term is fraught with a high risk of arbitrariness, and requires gradation or inclusion of significant differences and shades (Lipiński 2020). Some critics of "right-wing populism" take into account such objections. For example, they duly note that besides the right-wing, there are also left-wing or centrist varieties of populism (Karwat 2017; Pierzchalski, Rydliński 2017). Accordingly, they suggest redefining conventional divisions. For example, they propose that the opposition of "enlightened elites" and "blinded people" should be replaced by the opposition of "winners and losers of neoliberal and global capitalism" (ibid). There are also those who argue that "the winners of globalisation resent the losers more than the other way round" (Helbling, Jungkunz 2019).

However, this does not change the fact that in many cases critics of "right-wing populism" do not seem particularly allergic to the aforementioned risk of arbitrary use of the word populism: they carelessly resort to the logic of exclusion where one should rather use the logic of gradation. Therefore they define "right-wing populism" in terms of nationalism, masculinism, xenophobia, sexism, racism and disregard for liberal democratic norms. They contrast it with left-wing and progressive populism, which, they argue, in opposition to that one, has the hopeful "the potential to address crises in a manner which secures the democratic project by deepening the legitimacy of real-existing democracies" and respect for civil rights as well as a "a stance open to immigration and refugees" (Gagnon et al. 2018).

Experts in the field argue that the methodological canon of the humanities and social sciences does not disqualify a research attitude because of its evaluative load or ideological commitment (von Beyme 2005; Grobler 2006; Heywood 2006). Apparently using such an assumption as his starting point, Michael Sandel, who, as noted above, can afford magnanimous gestures toward "right-wing populism," feels entitled to use overly explicit

phrasing when discrediting this ideology. It is in this style that he voices his conviction that democracy is threatened by: populism in the form of "racist, xenophobic reactions to immigrants and multiculturalism"; "the bigotry of populist protests"; "shallow, authoritarian, hyper-nationalist constructs of thought"; "shallow, intolerant, fundamentalist and nationalist alternatives" (Sandel 2021).

Like Michael Sandel, Miroslaw Karwat also makes no secret of his sincere personal antipathy to "right-wing populism." What is haunting democracy in Poland? Karwat claims that it is "authoritarian religiosity" or "religious-clerical populism" inspired by an "ultra-conservative, fundamentalist interpretation of traditions and patterns of religiosity." This "authoritarian religiosity" is characterised by the following description:

> It challenges worldview pluralism and worldview neutrality of the state [and also] appropriates public space in an aggressive manner by filling it with religious symbols (…), stigmatising 'unbelievers' and the godless. (…) (Karwat 2017). Even more blatantly authoritarian is 'jingoistic' populism, marked by a symbiosis and synthesis of sanctimonious, xenophobic and ultra-nationalist, if not chauvinistic accents. (…) The current rule of the Law and Justice party (...) is a laboratory of 'populist democracy' [in which] clerical-religious, jingoistic, nationalist, xenophobic and radical (because it settles accounts with the past, 'avenging') currents of populism interact (Karwat 2017).

The blunt style of depicting "right-wing populism" also applies to comparative measures; however, also in this case the attitude of analysts varies. For example, it is difficult to criticise the author, who – while considering the reasons for electoral successes of populist politicians – claims that a sense of exclusion brought Jarosław Kaczyński to power in Poland, or Viktor Orbán in Hungary, that it contributed to Narendra Modi's victory in India and Shinzō Abe's in Japan (Bieber 2018a). Even views of Edward Carr from "The Economist", who listed the regime of People's Republic of China alongside the current regimes of Poland, India, Japan, the United Kingdom, the USA or Germany, are not marked by excessive syncretism because they are justified by the context of the comparisons he made (Carr 2018).

However, there are sets of anti-liberal populist regimes that can be perplexing. After all, it is not clear how the following phrase from Bieber (2018b) should be interpreted: "the democratic backsliding around the world, from Hungary to Turkey, from Venezuela to the United States". Similar confusion can be caused by a set proposed by Michael Sandel, who in 2016 in one breath denounced the "authoritarianism" of the United States under Donald Trump, Poland led by Jarosław Kaczyński and China ruled by Xi Jinping (Sandel 2021).

Other analysts, in a similar fashion, had no objections to putting the "nationalism"-inspired, "populist" regime of Viktor Orbán, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin in the same basket (Jenne 2018; Yatsyk 2019).

"Right-wing populism" in the eyes of its supporters

In the second image of "right-wing populism," as in the first, the terms globalism and globalisation are one of the key elements characterising its causes. Here, it also refers to a doctrine, ideology, or fanaticism of globalisation or globalism (Cichocki 2018-2019; Manent 2018-2019; Millon-Delsol 2017).

However, this is where the similarity of these images ends. The second does not define the crisis of democracy in terms of the plague of "right-wing populism." Rather, the said crisis, as French scholar Pierre Manent notes, consists in discrediting the "populist" electorate, that is, the exclusion of a significant portion of voters from the democratic process. In addition, until now, the political scene has been traditionally divided into the right and the left. And now it is governed by a strange opposition between "populism" and what is described as values-based leadership (Manent 2018-2019).

In France, these strange criteria for ordering the political spectrum date back to 1974, when the French right, initiating an era of "liberalism and Europeanism", abandoned its voters. A few years later, the French left made a similar move, thus joining the ranks of the "parties of the centre that fanatically globalise reality" (ibid.). As a result, notions such as people, nation and class lost relevance in public debate. In turn, the new orthodoxy of democracy evidently undermines the principle of democratic legitimacy, setting itself a goal of a kind of "democracy without the people, without the nation; a non-national or post-national democracy" (ibid.).

The political marginalisation of "populist" France has also been analysed by Chantal Millon-Delsol. In her view, the attitude of the French elite is derived from the arrogance and dogmatism of the Enlightenment, which betrayed the intellectual and spiritual heritage of the ancient Hellenes. To the Greeks, truth and goodness presented themselves as the object of an eternal search doomed to endless disputes and the irremovable risk of error. The Enlightenment dogmatised them, turning them into a universalist and, at the same time, individualistic ideology, which, with a missionary concern that remains strong to this day, disqualifies impulses of opposition directed against it as a manifestation of compulsive ignorance and backwardness. Since, in the present day, the emancipation of the individual from the pressure of traditional social obligations,

according to the spirit of the Enlightenment ideology, is supposed to be in due harmony with the trends of Europeanisation and globalisation, it became critical of manifestations of solidarity not only towards family, but also towards nation (Millon-Delsol 2017).

In the eyes of modern French opinion, the "populist" electorate deserves to be condemned and stigmatised. Unlike the "savage" or the former peasant, who could often hope if not for sympathy, then at least for tolerance, because they were not guilty of their own immaturity, that electorate degenerated itself. It disregarded the chance of being offered full humanity:

> It has stepped outside the narrative of history, the only human history worked out as part of progress. Since in our country the dominant opinion considers European construction as an integral part of this inevitable history, those who voted in the referendum against deepening integration fell victim to insults (ibid).

The crisis, or at least the serious defects of democracy, in modern Germany is noted by Joseph Isensee. In his view, one of its manifestations is a clearly shaken political pluralism. The political system and public debate on the Rhine have been dominated by the party and media establishment, favouring the left side of the political-ideological spectrum, which, based on the left-liberal canon of political correctness, subjects public discussion to regular censorship on such topics as climate protection, gender equality, migration, Islam, European integration or issues of national identities. Anything that comes into collision with this left-liberal "catechism" is subjected to "exorcism" and derided as populism, which indisputably deserves to be condemned due to its alleged features, such as: racism, fascism, nationalism, sexism, etc. (Isensee 2017).

Referring to the AfD's political successes in the 2017 parliamentary elections, Josef Isensee notes with undisguised satisfaction that a grouping has emerged on the right side of the German political scene that is bringing formerly concealed topics back into public discussion. It is not surprising, then, that this kind of grouping encounters outright hostility from centrist and left-wing parties, just as it does in France, the Netherlands and Austria. However, despite all this adversity:

> Right-wing pariahs suddenly find confirmation of their views in the election of Trump as US president. Suppressed political beliefs are unexpectedly coming to the fore again. Some see this as a threat to democracy, while others see it as proof of its vitality, as it makes it possible to break petrified power structures, remove conceited opinion leaders, trample on political correctness, vent political anger and escape resignation by returning to the polls. (...) Tired of consensus, democracy is reviving again (ibid.).

Isensee's point of view is echoed by Marek Cichocki. He claims that the culture war, which has been shaking up the post-Cold War West, does not seem to result from the outbreak of nationalist and xenophobic sentiment. Rather, it is the result of a defect in current liberalism, which does not tolerate dissent. The political mobilisation of the "populist" voter clearly involves a contestation of the liberal democratic consensus, which, for almost three decades, has been patronised by the false idea of the end of history. It is thanks to this contestation that the future of the West has again become an area of conflict of ideas and liberalism is losing its privileged position as hegemon. The prospect of real conflicts and serious decisions is once again opening up before the political communities. What this means for them, among other things is that:

> they return to the language of democracy, and this language allows them to adequately and representatively describe their new situation of crisis, which occurs after rejecting the idea of the end of history. However, this does not need to entail either new forms of nihilism, chaos or a renewed escalation of violence in politics (Cichocki 2018-2019)."

Chantal Millon-Delsol also argues that the widespread rise of the "populist" wave does not pose a threat to the democratic order, but brings hope for overcoming its weaknesses. Stigmatised as populist, voters indeed contest "hidden agreements where an open exchange of views is expected." They are also opposed to "a de facto monopoly, hidden under the guise of a pluralistic discourse." They do not demand the abolition of representative institutions, but would like to find their representatives in them. They are thus genuine defenders of democracy, parliamentarism, pluralism and transparency (Millon-Delsol 2017).

Sympathy for contemporary "populism" is also expressed by Pierre Manent. He claims, not without concern, that nations that are "constantly discredited and punished" by the political establishment, both the structures of the EU and its Member States, for their independence and their adherence to more traditional and therefore genuine forms of political pluralism and democratic representation:

> will [eventually] succumb to a desperate and harmful nationalism. If [however] this happens, the demagogy of 'populisms' will bear far less responsibility for this state of affairs than the parties of the centre that are fanatically globalising the reality (Manent 2018-2019).

In short, Pierre Manent, Chantal Millon-Delsol, Joseph Isensee and Marek Cichocki, arguing with critics of "right-wing populism", claim that the real source of the crisis of democracy is not the contestation of the liberal consen-

sus, but the political marginalisation of a great number of full-fledged voters, who are stigmatised as fascists and extremists, the censoring of public debate with the axioms of political correctness and discrediting the family and the nation in the name of universalist claims of the ideologies of individualism, multiculturalism or globalism. In other words, the above authors do not share the view that modern democracy is threatened by an eruption of anti-liberal Manichaeism, fanaticism and xenophobia. Rather, it is threatened by the left-liberal cartel of the party and media establishment, which is determined to preserve its "de facto monopoly, disguised as pluralistic discourse" in order not to lose its "privileged position as a hegemon".

The concept of democracy

The two types of views on "right-wing populism" presented here are very remote from each other. However, differences of opinion among researchers, as well as between citizens, do not have to trigger confusion. On the contrary, the consequences can be useful and rewarding for the various parties to the dispute. In this case, however, the scale of incommensurability of opinions on one and the same topic should be thought-provoking. There is almost no dialogue, but rather almost two monologues. This does not bear witness to modern democracy and the debate taking place within it: not only the broad one, but also the narrow, learned one. The divergence of views presented here seems to demonstrate a crisis of democratic consensus. Trying to find out the reasons for this state of affairs, let us consider whether and to what extent it may be related to a possible disagreement concerning the very concept of democracy.

The confusion around this concept, prevailing both in the discussion of scholars and in the broad public debate, was probably caused by Friedrich and Brzezinski's typology (Friedrich, Brzeziński 1956). This concept consisted in distinguishing three types of regimes: democracy, authoritarianism and totalitarianism. A scale of values has also been linked to this distinction with democracy being the best of these regimes; authoritarianism, like totalitarianism, embodies systemic pathology, only to a relatively lesser extent.

While this typology made a staggering career, it also caused critical comments. In particular, doubts were raised by the opposition of democracy and authoritarianism, as well as democracy and totalitarianism.

The term authoritarianism, in the sense in which it was used in the well-known typology of American political scientists, had been borrowed by them from Benito Mussolini (Sartori 1994). That borrowing was justified because,

indeed, in the Italian dictator's propaganda, authoritarian rule was the polar opposite of parliamentary rule. Mussolini's idea, however, should not have been imitated, for strictly substantive reasons. *Il Duce*, driven by the ambition to refer to the venerable, state tradition of ancient *Roma*, falsified it. He missed the source of the political sense of *auctoritas*, which in the system of the Roman republic meant that particular kind of power that lay within the competence of the Senate, a body which enjoyed special reputation, but whose authority had no claim to overbearing, unconditional obedience. This kind of prerogative, i.e. *imperium*, the right to command, was held by magistrate offices, such as consul or praetor (Arendt 1994; Plessner 1988).

Friedrich and Brzezinski's opposition of democracy and authoritarianism does not seem to be the most fortunate solution for another reason. It suggests an understanding of political freedom in dangerously strong opposition to political authority. It has, in other words, anarchist implications and it justifies the doctrinaire sense of contesting political authority from the position of the apotheosis of political freedom.

There are more reasons to doubt the typology of American political scientists. Giovanni Sartori rightly argues that the correct opposite of democracy is not authoritarianism, but autocracy (Sartori 1994). Friedrich Hayek expressed far-reaching doubts about the concept of the polar opposition of democracy and totalitarianism. He challenged Friedrich and Brzezinski's concept, absolving authoritarianism, which he associated with the liberal order, i.e. the parliamentary, constitutional, law-abiding and pluralistic order. He attributed totalitarian tendencies to democracy (Hayek 1997). In the second element (claim) of his scandalous revelation, Hayek engaged with Jakob Talmon's treatise (1952) with understanding.

Arguably, it is probably a paradox of our time that democracy, which usually arouses enthusiasm or is the object of genuine desires and far-reaching expectations, is at the same time something against which it is necessary to defend things and values that are really precious, in the opinion of numerous commentators and analysts. One of them, Bernard Crick, out of scepticism about democratic enthusiasm, pointed out something that he thought was worth defending against democracy. That thing is politics (Crick 2004). His remarks seem valuable because for some reason the term politics for the general public now has connotations as negative as the term politicians. This has not always been the case. In the classical republican tradition, or in the First Polish Republic that drew upon that tradition, *political* meant polite, cultured, civilised, intelligent, regardless of the fact that the attitude of politicians from earlier historical periods probably aroused outrage or disgust, no less often than today.

Crick's reflections are also valuable as they remind us that what is at stake in the great (though frequently overwhelmed by mundaneness and discouragement) game of civil communities is not only freedom and authority or justice, but also politics. In other words, Crick reminds us (in keeping with the spirit and letter of classical republicanism) that the essential, most significant feature of a good regime is not so much its democratic but precisely its political nature (ibid.).

Crick does not completely deny the value of democracy. He admits that it can be compatible with politics. Moreover, he even claims that "it is impossible to imagine politics without democracy today." At the same time, however, he emphasises that it is only a part of modern Western political systems, and not the most important part. Therefore, he argues that "popular and vague democratic rhetoric must be contrasted with historical analysis. (...) If democracy wishes to be everything and not just one component of politics, it will destroy politics" (ibid.).

The idea to defend politics against democracy resulted in noteworthy terminological postulates. Crick, referring to a long tradition dating back to Aristotle, proposed that, without completely forgetting democracy, the word *politeja* should be used. In turn, Michael Oakeshott suggested that this most politically valuable thing, which is worth defending against falsehood and the excess of democratic expectations and promises, should most sensibly be called nomocracy (Oakeshott 2008).

With a more reserved and a less critical approach to the concept of democracy than Hayek, Crick or Oakeshott, Robert Dahl also proposed the concept of polyarchy, which is not so much a substitute but a more accurate term (Dahl 1995). However, other American analysts of modern democracy, such as Charles Tilly or John Rawls (Rawls 1998; Tilly 2008) did not have similar objections. The consistency with which these two authors respect that privilege of the idea of democracy may be puzzling. However, they can be justified because in fact they employ a broad, rather than a narrow, concept of democracy, that is, one that in a sense takes into account Crick's remarks that democracy is only a part of the political order of contemporary Western societies, and not the most important part, and that, therefore, the part should not be confused with the whole.

Yet another idea for an equivalent to the term democracy has been proposed by Eric von Kuehnelt-Leddihn. He argues that demarchy is a better cause than democracy, worthy of engaging the civic heart and mind. Its advantage over democracy is that it defines the power of the people (*demos*) contained in its concept in a less overbearing way, and therefore, less than democracy,

susceptible to totalitarian inclinations, against which Hayek and Talmon warn. The suffix *archy*, present in demarchy, is also found in such terms as polyarchy or monarchy mentioned here. *Arche* or *-archy* has the advantage of expressing the idea of popular rule in a milder way than *kratos* or *-cracy* (Kratos in Greek mythology was the god of strength, power and violence) (von Kuehnelt-Leddihn 2008).

The terminological proposals presented here are only a fraction of the tradition of political reflection, whose representatives assume that the idea of democracy is dangerous to the extent that it is susceptible to hasty interpretations, the effects of which should be protected from the systemic order of contemporary political communities. This is a respectable tradition and is still alive today even in the British debate, at least since Charles Gray's democratic electoral reform in 1832. Many apologists for the "undemocratic components of democracy" have shown considerable ingenuity in defending the British order, the balanced constitution, or the mixed regime, and in fear of the possible consequences of the overly radical claims of democratic reformers and activists (Hearnshaw 1967; Kedourie 1984; Maude 1969; Oakeshott 2008; Scruton 2002; Willets 1992).

These are warnings derived from different positions. One of the most important has been derived from the tradition of ancient (classical) republicanism, at which Aristotle excelled, as did Aristophanes, whose testimony was referred to, among others, by the British historian Nicholas G. L. Hammond. The Greek comedy writer commented on the democratic reforms of Ephialtes and Pericles, dismissing them with a phrase that expressed fear of the consequences of the dizzying promise of popular government: "Ephialtes [as Aristophanes noted] poured out for the citizens a full and unadulterated draught of freedom" (Hammond 1977).

It is worth noting, however, that this tradition of scepticism towards the faith placed in the democratisation process also found critics in the British Isles, who argued with zest that the democratisation of British parliamentarism made it not only fundamentally more socially just (less oligarchic, patrician), but also much more law-abiding (Eccleshall 1984; Leach 1996). They also argued that not only did this process not disintegrate the order of the system, but it proved to be a factor in its successful consolidation (Cowling 1971). There were also credible advocates of the same transformational pattern, but referring to other countries, such as the United States, France or Switzerland (Baszkiewicz 2002; Dahl 1995; Tilly 2008).

The search for terminological equivalents for the troublesome word democracy seems very interesting. So far, however, they have not been able to

weaken the privileged position that this word has enjoyed in Western debate for a hundred years. It invariably remains a source of serious problems. Democracy is a concept that lacks precision, which is largely a consequence of the fact that it has been built on misguided distinctions and not the most fortunate polemical points of reference (Sartori 1994). As a result, this concept is prone to hasty interpretations. In this sense, it also seems to be a tool of persuasion or agitation rather than a reliable analysis (Crick 2004). If this is the case, it would not be out of place, though undoubtedly against a convention strongly rooted in Western debate, to ask: why refer to the Western political order using the terms democratic or democracy?

The place of liberalism in democracy

The problem of the determinants of the far-reaching divergence of views on the contemporary crisis of political consensus seems to apply not only to the concept of democracy. An important point of reference for the parties to the dispute over "right-wing populism" is their attitude to liberalism and its proper place in the public debate and the institutional order of Western democracies. The way in which the protagonists of liberalism defend their beliefs in this dispute seems to be reflected in one of the statements of Andrzej Szahaj, who appeals not to hurry with undue haste:

> with criticism of (...) the liberal democratic consensus (...). What would replace it? How can one responsibly want to overthrow its hegemony? What to replace liberal democracy with? (...) [it] has been overthrown several times. The result, however, has always been the same: something much worse emerged. (...) After all these lessons, how can one want to overthrow the liberal democratic consensus? (...) It is easy (...) to delegitimise political liberalism, but it is more difficult to build something better on its ruins. (...) Western political culture, after centuries of painful learning process, has come to the conclusion that the liberal democratic system is the best of all known so far, and it is impossible to imagine a better one. I agree with Fukuyama (Szahaj 2011a) and (Shahai 2011c).

In other words, Andrzej Szahaj argues that there is no credible and responsible alternative to liberal democracy and the liberal democratic consensus today. Liberalism, linked to democracy, has reached the role of a systemic standard in the Western world that now lacks serious competition. This should not come as a surprise, given the historical experience of the past few hundred years of Western history. Liberalism did not come out of the blue. It is the result of a long and hard-won response to the challenges brought by, among other

things, religious wars and totalitarianism. It is not without reason that it turned out to be the general winner of the political battles that have been fought in Europe for at least 400 years (Szahaj 2011a; 2011b).

This and similar liberal opinions do not always find approval. Critical views are expressed by Chantal Millon-Delsol, Marek Cichocki, Pierre Manent and Josef Isensee, quoted above, but also by many other authors, such as Samuel Huntington (2004), John Gray (2001), Kenneth Minogue (2010) or Ryszard Legutko (2011a; 2011b).

The latter notes that to identify liberalism with freedom is an abuse because inherent in its nature the intention to dominate. As a fundamental condition for open debate and the unrestricted exchange of ideas, liberals declare themselves as zealous defenders of the right to free speech, for even the most controversial opinions, including those they do not share in any way. However, their solemn proclamations are of little value. By assuring that they are only concerned with creating a framework for free discussion and cooperation, they always put themselves in a higher position. They take on the "subservient" role of organisers, even towards those who do not want to be organised. Along with their declared intention to create only a framework comes an intention of self-restraint, but insincere. And those who cannot be accused of such hypocrisy lose excessive optimism. They excessively assume that in realising the ideal of liberal pluralism it is easy to separate the formal priority from the material one. Contrary to these hopes, in practice the two priorities are very often confused (Legutko 2011a).

It is noteworthy that the opposition to, as not only their critics but also their followers put it, hegemonic and universalist liberal aspirations, applies not only the present but also history. This is because, as can be seen in Andrzej Szahaj's statement, these aspirations have their historical justification, usually based on what Herbert Butterfield (1973) called the Whig interpretation of history (also called the Whig historical myth).

Entering into a dispute with this justification, the aforementioned Ryszard Legutko accuses liberals of their irresistible tendency to look at the past as a state of outrageous lack of freedom (Legutko 2011a). He claims that their idea of the origins of the political order of contemporary Western societies has little to do with the truth because the formation of political institutions in modern Europe and America is not the exclusive, or even a special work of liberalism. It had been influenced by other traditions, and:

> only in the liberal fable do we find the theory that for centuries peoples had lived in oppression and tyranny until finally the liberal vision shone through, which brought peace, prosperity and liberty. The claim that liberalism has become the 'standard' and a 'labori-

ously developed' response to conflict is a gross simplification that mystifies not only history but also thinking about politics and political institutions. People creating modern and contemporary state institutions were mostly not liberals (Legutko 2011b).

In sum, Ryszard Legutko and other critics of liberalism accuse its followers of overestimating the role of their own intellectual and political tradition, at the same time neglecting or underestimating the contribution of the non-liberal or pre-liberal legacy to the existence and shape of the contemporary order.

In other words, the question of the relevance and vitality of the pre-liberal political legacy in the context of considerations about the roots and accordingly the nature of the contemporary order is the subject of fundamental dispute.

At one end of the spectrum of positions on this subject, there are, among others, the opinions of Charles Tilly or John Rawls. The former represents a kind of consequentialist modernism. Contemporary democracy, in Tilly's opinion, has its pre-liberal precedents, but weak and only partial. Yes, ancient republicanism developed an impressive idea and practice of citizenship. It is true that there was medieval or early modern constitutionalism and parliamentarism, but it personified freedom and the rule of law in a very incipient and underdeveloped way. From the point of view of the political standards of modern democracy, it raises more doubts than satisfaction. Therefore, it must be clearly stated that there is no continuity between the present and the former. Our freedom and equality are, in their essence and origin, modern. They had no strong precedents in pre-modern times (Tilly 2008).

Jan Baszkiewicz is arguably less principled in this respect than Tilly but something analogous can be said about his attitude to the institutions of pre-liberal parliamentarism and constitutionalism. The touch of scepticism prevails here over the recognition of the importance of the fact that the journey towards the more mature political forms of later periods was undertaken at that time, and the first trails were blazed (Baszkiewicz 2002).

John Rawls' position is also different from that of Charles Tilly. His modernism, however, is similarly strong. Political liberalism, i.e. the ideological foundation of the modern order, owes little to the heritage of ancient republicanism or medieval Christianity. Ancient times, in particular, were not marked by the conflict between authoritative and expansionist salvation-based religions. Political liberalism grows out of the unprecedented experience of the modern era, that is, of the insurmountable and profound pluralism of "vast doctrines." It originated from the Reformation and its aftermath with its long disputes about religious tolerance in the 16th and 17th centuries" (Rawls 1998).

Robert Dahl, like Tilly and Rawls, a contemporary classic of American political science, is a modernist, who is more restrained than the others. His writings feature an important and clearly emphasised finding: contemporary macro-democracy is something unprecedented, but it seems to be a serious debtor to the tradition of mediaeval representative institutions (Dahl 1995).

It could be argued that Samuel Huntington is an opponent of modernism when he claims that in the essential spiritual and institutional sense of this word, the West, which in his opinion should be defended against liberal doctrinairism, acquired its identity before it became modern (Huntington 2004). A similar attitude is taken by Michael Oakeshott. He points out that nomocracy has numerous pre-modern, strong precedents, and the modern era abounds in numerous examples of the failures of nomocracy in its clash with the elements of teleocracy, which is its opposite (Oakeshott 2008).

One of the hardest formulas of anti-modernism has been provided by the British historian Jonathan C. D. Clark. His concept of the origins of modernity is marked by a deep approval of the typically mediaevalist idea of the "medieval roots of English individualism", or a thorough revision of the concept of the "great 18th century", which poses a real challenge to the dominant trend of "Whig" historiography. Also interesting and powerful is his defence of the political heritage of the German old order, blamed for its stubborn aversion to Enlightenment and liberal modern era that culminated in the 20th century catastrophe of expansionism and totalitarianism (Clark 1990; Clark 2004).

Finally, what can be said of Harold Berman's concept, which is no less revisionist than Clark's. This author, who has challenged the textbook canons of periodisation and the message of Renaissance humanists and philosophers of the Enlightenment, identifies the inauguration of the modern era with the political and civilisational transformations of the so-called papal revolution, which took place in the Middle Ages (Berman 1995).

A cursory review of positions on the authoritativeness, relevance or vitality of the pre-liberal and pre-modern political legacy in the realities (or mental and institutional structures) of the order of contemporary democracy indicates their far-reaching polarisation. Some believe that there is no alternative to the liberal consensus because there is no alternative to Western democracy and Western freedom, which are essentially the work of liberals and their intellectual and political traditions. Others, critical of the Whig historical myth, argue that challenging the liberal consensus is not the same as rejecting or undermining the Western political order. This order is neither as liberal in its nature nor as modern in its origins as the proponents of the liberal democratic consensus claim. Of course, the point is not, as the latter say, that the liberal concept of

the nature and origins of this order is fundamentally untrue, but rather that it is more debatable than its followers would like.

All of the above raises the question: why approve the claims of the Whig historical myth to authoritativeness in the Western debate if these claims are highly controversial? Moving further, it would be appropriate to ask (as in the previous section on the concept of democracy) the question: why call the modern Western order liberal? The rationale for these questions would also be essentially the same as in the case of investigations into the controversial role played by the concept of democracy in contemporary debate: the term liberal, in relation to the Western order, is a tool of persuasion or agitation rather than analysis.

Conclusion

The surprisingly large divergence of positions in the dispute over "right-wing populism" is, among other things, due to the fact that it also covers issues of democracy and liberalism. Democracy is important for both sides of these controversies since they accuse each other of violating democratic principles. However, the main reason for the divergence of their positions does not seem to *what* this democracy should be like, but *whose*. In other words, the reason why their views have become so polarised is their markedly different attitude towards liberalism, especially to its place in the contemporary democratic process and the related public debate.

Besides the reasons for the far-reaching difference of opinion in this dispute, the picture presented here also invites comments on the credibility of the research attitude of both sides. The competences of critics of "right-wing populism" come out worse in this confrontation. Yes, they do take into account important differences and shades, but often fail to do so. By resorting to rhetorical devices such as the *reductio ad Hitlerum,* they demonise the opinions of those who contest the liberal consensus, as well as the style of government inspired by them, e.g. Donald Trump, Jarosław Kaczyński or Viktor Orbán. In doing so, they ignore the substantial difference that separates them not only from evidently and essentially totalitarian regimes, but also from the Turkish, Russian or Iranian case of "democracy without liberalism".

Exaggeration was arguably not avoided by their opponents, such as Pierre Manent, Chantal Millon-Delsol or Joseph Isensee quoted here. However, supporters of "right-wing populism" speak in a more matter-of-fact and balanced way than its critics. To a much lesser extent than their opponents, they are said to conjure reality more than they describe it.

The clash of positions of both sides of the dispute over "right-wing populism" allows us to note something else. Perhaps it would be unfair to accuse the censors of this "populism", of a patronising attitude towards its supporters. However, they give the impression that they are making their accusations from the position of host, mentor or super-arbiter of democratic debate.

The evaluative load, as emphasised in the above analyses, does not undermine the credibility of the research attitude. In any case, it does not always have to have this type of consequences. Therefore, the defenders of the liberal consensus cannot be reproached for their attachment to the Whig historical myth. Supporters of "right-wing populism" could also be accused of cultivating their own comforting narratives, many of which deserve, from the point of view of honest historical research, no more than a reputation of a useful legend. However, adhering to the ambitions of a generous organiser and neutral supervisor of democratic debate, while at the same time being one of the parties to the dispute, brings with it more far-reaching and risky requirements than practicing the virtues of impartiality and objectivity by a commentator who does not want to renounce their axiological or doctrinal identity.

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses contemporary political debate regarding the dispute over "right-wing populism", the strong polarisation and cognitive credibility of the conflicting opinions, the controversial nature of its key concepts and intellectual conformism to the dominant climate of opinion. The key point of the entire text concerns the source of cognitive defects in contemporary criticism of "right-wing populism". It expresses the author's conviction that they result from the approval of the hegemonic aspirations of the liberal mind. The aim of the article has critical and apologetic aspects. The former refers to

the style of polemics used regarding dissenters against the liberal democratic consensus, which discredits it with the stigmatising epithet "populism". The latter applies to this tradition of understanding the origins and nature of Western freedom (present, for example, in the Tory traditionalists of the "Peterhouse School" also known as the "Salisbury Group"), which emphasises not only the importance but also the vitality of the premodern political legacy. The analyses contained in the article represent an interpretative theoretical approach. The article uses a comparative and historical method. The research procedure here includes, among others, the confrontation not only between different opinions, but also the clash of two historical perspectives, i.e. the contemporary discussion on "right-wing populism" and, in the longer term, debate on democracy and liberalism.