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Contemporary populist politics through the macroscopic lens of Randall Collins's conflict theory

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Abstract
This paper draws on Collins's conflict theory to understand the contemporary surge of populism. It puts forward an account centred on citizenship rights and the state, and on 'my nation first' politics in four countries: the US, Sweden, India and China. Collins has identified a capitalist crisis, the dynamics of geopolitical legitimacy, and state-penetrating bureaucracy as three central processes in modern societies. Especially the last of these focuses attention on the conflict between cosmopolitan elites and 'the people', construed in exclusionary terms, which is on the rise in all of the four cases discussed here. The paper analyses the similarities and differences between them, and sketches the prospects for populist politics.

Keywords
Randall Collins, conflict, political sociology, populism, right-wing

Introduction

Randall Collins has written about a wide variety of topics over the course of his career. In recent years, he has devoted most of his efforts to micro-sociology, and understanding violence in particular. Yet in his earlier work, he often dealt with macro-sociological and comparative-historical topics, and indeed he has referred to a 'golden age' of historical sociology (1999: 1–18). Talk of a 'golden age' also points to another feature of Collins's

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work, which is that he has been highly reflective about where and why progress – or lack of progress – is being made in the social sciences. Indeed, he has theorized about cumulation in the (social) sciences (Collins and Sanderson, 2016: 8–12). He has also not been shy about arguing that sociology should be able to predict future macro-social change, as with his successful prediction in 1978 about the fall of the Soviet Union (1999: 37–69).

This paper argues that there is much to be said for revisiting Collins's main macro-sociological insights. Yet the paper also argues that there is ~~also~~ a crucial gap in his writings, which is that he does not systematically tie various macro-processes together. This has meant that he is unable to account for what is arguably the most important recent change to the political landscape in several parts of the world: the rise of (especially right-wing) populism. The paper will proceed as follows: first, it will summarize some of Collins's main macro-sociological insights and how they might be brought to bear on populism; insights about long-term economic change, about geopolitics and its effect on political change, and about social movements democratizing the state. However, one shortcoming is that he never specifies the interplay between these processes, so that he cannot account systemically for some key contemporary macro-changes. The second part of the paper therefore discusses how the lens of conflict sociology, which is the unifying thread in Collins's work, can help us to understand populism. Here I will focus on four cases – the US, Sweden, India and China – since they represent extremes among the varieties of capitalism in the case of the former pair (for example, Pontusson, 2005) and two rival models among developing societies (for example, Bardhan, 2010). Seen as the product of conflict between elites and forces 'from below' that plays out in different ways in various parts of the world, populism is both a threat to liberal democracy and also an extension of a longer-term process of democratization. These ideas lead to an assessment~~s~~ of populism's prospects.

Collins on markets, geopolitics and democratization

Collins has recently put forward two main arguments about economic change, both based on the idea that innovation is at the core of capitalism. One is that finance has become the apex of markets. According to Collins, there has been a pyramiding effect whereby financial markets have developed on top of existing capitalist markets. He calls these 'superordinate markets': 'Capitalism is an omnimarket society . . . omnicapitalism stays dynamic by creating new markets for superordinate goods, including both financial instruments and consumer goods impregnated with social status' (1999: 206). In a consumer society, credit has itself in recent decades become a manipulable commodity. Thus investment using ever more sophisticated financial instruments benefits consumers and organizations at the top of the stratification order who can take advantage of financial services which are the most advanced and profitable part of capitalism; a financialization of the economy. Yet over the long-term, Collins argues, capitalism tends towards crisis, and new types of exchange will replace this system.

This leads to a second argument about a future crisis of capitalism. Collins has suggested that technological innovation in the form of labour-saving robots and advanced computing techniques will mean that jobs will inevitably become more scarce

in the future relative to the number who seek them, a crisis especially acute for the middle class whose jobs are most likely to be affected (Collins, 2013). He also goes through various possible 'escape' scenarios for this crisis, such as the creation of new types of jobs or state employment – only to rule them all out. Hence he argues that, over the long-term, capitalism will be replaced by an as-yet-unforeseeable non-capitalist system. In respect of economic change then, Collins agrees with Marxist world-systems theorists in foreseeing crisis. Yet it is not clear to me, based on what is known from the sociology of consumption, that new markets for ever more refined status distinctions cannot be created indefinitely. And while the aforementioned financialization may create instabilities, again, it is not clear that this will result in full-blown crisis or in a replacement of the capitalist economy. Be that as it may, here I simply want to point out that Collins regards markets or capitalism as having their own separate dynamics which are not tied directly to political movements or other macro-changes. I agree (even if not with the crisis aspect) that markets are 'orthogonal' to political change, but as we shall see, an end to the post-war era of high economic growth also contributes to the contemporary surge of populism.

Collins has also put forward ideas about geopolitical change. Here he follows Weber in arguing that great powers seek geopolitical pre-eminence which affects their legitimacy. Hence the breakdown of the Soviet empire when it could no longer sustain its position in the Cold War vis-à-vis its military rival, the US. What I would like to focus on here is, as Collins puts it, how 'internal legitimacy and external power-prestige are connected' (1986: 165). In relation to populism, this connection would suggest that the ascendancy and decline of great powers is somehow connected to 'my nation first' politics. As we shall see, that may be part of the explanation, but not straightforwardly so, since both a geopolitically relatively declining power (the US) and a rising one (India) have populist leaders. Collins also, intriguingly, suggests that geopolitical prestige may be at the root of how some lesser powers responded to the recent refugee crisis in Europe: 'small states, without military power', he says, 'can achieve international prestige by staking out their position as leading internationalists' (2018: 319); in other words, gaining prestige in the international community on the basis of their humanitarian stance. This might account for the policies of countries like Sweden and Germany, but perhaps more among leaders and elites than among voters where populist parties have been gaining.

The third long-term pattern that we might bring to bear is democratization. Here I have in mind not so much how Collins uses geopolitics to explain the emergence of the 'two dimensions' of democracy, 'collegial power', no longer concentrated but decentralized, and 'the extent of the franchise', which has been ever widening (1999: 114). Instead I have in mind, as Collins explains elsewhere, how increasing state capacity due to geopolitical rivalry has led to the penetration of society by the state, and brought forth democratization from below. This argument is contained in Collins's summary of Mann's position: 'In the late twentieth century and into the next', left/right or class conflict movements as

> forms of group mobilization have not been superseded, but they have been joined by many more movements: race and ethnicity (construed in various ways), gender, sexual preference,

> student, environmentalist, animal rights, anti- and pro-religious movements. All these operate under the umbrella of the overarching, society-penetrating state, and thus make an appeal to the same large public consciousness and to state enforcement of their demands. (2006: 30–1)

He adds that since there are so many of these movements, this has led to political gridlock, with many movements seeking outcomes that overlap and intersect but also cancel each other out in a crowded arena.

Growing state capacity thus politicizes classes, ethnic groups and other social movements that seek rights from the state and this, as we shall see, is part of the explanation of populism. This is also one place where Collins hints that various macro-processes converge: 'bureaucratization is the master trend of modern history' (2007: 389), he says, in a statement that Weber would have wholeheartedly agreed with. As the state gains bureaucratic power, as he puts it in an early essay on Weber, 'competing elites may appeal for support to groups not previously participating in the power struggle, and, as a result, dissipate their power still further to the point of becoming representatives of these lower classes. (This, in fact, is a capsule history of democratic institutions)' (1968: 49). In other words, Collins takes seriously, as Mann and Weber do, the autonomy of political (the state) from economic power, or that it is not just economic class conflict that drives history. Instead, legitimacy and geopolitics, both in terms of growing state capacity due to militarism but also as responses to geopolitical fortunes, have shaped democratic struggles. (As an aside, this primacy or autonomy of politics points to the fact that economic processes and political ones are also separate in the sense that the bureaucratization of economic organizations, another macro-trend of modernity, and of the state, have largely been separate processes.)

But there are three problems in seeing populist movements and parties as new claimants of rights from the state: one is that in addition to seeking more rights within the state, as previous social movements have done, populists also seek to exclude others from those rights – for example, in the case of left-wing populists, excluding foreign economic powers and the global flow of workers, and in the case of right-wing populism excluding immigrants and 'others'. The second problem is that populists seek representation directly, as a whole people, and want to do away with technocracy (Caramani, 2017) and with intermediate institutions and rights for all enforced impersonally, which is the essence of the state's bureaucracy. The third problem is that, according to Collins, the current (or recent) geopolitical constellation favours multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, which 'looks down on the local and the particular as retrograde and morally inferior' (1999: 108–9). Again, this may be true of how cosmopolitans see themselves, but it is the opposite of how populists see themselves. And there is one further problem that does not pertain to populism per se and that has already been mentioned, which is that Collins's writings do not provide an overarching theory of how economic or capitalist change, geopolitical and state-centred change, and rationalization as cultural change (which can also be seen as a separate modernizing process that contributes to technocracy) are interrelated. Collins has not to my knowledge turned to populism – perhaps this paper will prompt him to do so. But if we want to bring his insights to bear on the phenomenon, there is no link between his view of the dynamic of capitalism and

of geopolitical change and only a very long-term link (state competition) between geopolitics and the state's bureaucratization. These several problems can only be resolved within an account that includes the long-term relations between markets, geopolitics, and state-centred politics. I have produced such an account earlier (2013), but here update it specifically to analyse more recent populist politics.

A conflict theory of populism

First, we must step back for a moment to provide a definition of populism and briefly review some of the main theories that have been put forward to explain it. Populism has been defined as pitting a homogeneous virtuous people against a corrupt elite, and politics should be the expression of the 'general will' of the people (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). There are three core elements to the definition: elites, 'the people', and who should be included and excluded in 'the people'. But while left-wing populism is directed against wealthy elites and external economic forces (including foreign workers and trade openness) that supposedly benefit from globalizing markets, right-wing populism is directed against cosmopolitan political elites and alleged threats to the integrity of the nation from 'others' within and without. Exclusion of out-groups and anti-elitism are two elements in widely accepted definitions of right-wing populism, which will be the focus here since it is the most successful type in cases examined here. The third element, equating 'the people' with the 'general will', is where political conflict is played out as populists seek more power. Mueller (2016) has coined the pithy phrase 'we are the 100%', and this sums up all three elements of the definition since the 100% excludes others, promotes the majority against elites, and seeks more representation for the '100%'.

Against the background of this widely accepted definition, two main explanations of the current surge of populism have been offered: an economic one, which argues that the 'losers' of globalization and its economic woes are the main supporters of populism (Judis, 2018). Here the economic crisis of 2008 plays a major role, as does the overall downturn in world economic growth since the 1970s. One problem here is that many strata, not just economically disadvantaged ones, support populism. Another is that populism has risen and declined in different periods, before and after 2008, in different countries, including countries such as Germany, where the economy has been strong during the period of a steep increase in recent support for its populist party. A second explanation is 'cultural' or 'identity' based (Fukuyama, 2018; Brubaker, 2017); but again, although ethnic or racial exclusion has been a factor in right-wing populism, immigration and racism have played different roles over different time periods, for example in the US before Trump's election and in Europe before the recent surge in populist party support.

What then explains populism? This brings us back to Collins's and Mann's analysis of the main dynamic of the state and social development during the 20th century in terms of pressures to expand the scope of citizenship rights. This idea has been developed by Mann (1988, 2013) drawing on T.H. Marshall as part of a broader explanation of globalizing processes. These rights, over time, included civil, political and social rights (though not necessarily in those three stages; in Germany, for example, social rights

came before civil and political rights). Classes, and latterly especially social movements, have struggled for citizenship rights to be recognized by and anchored in the state (Turner, 1986). Social citizenship rights have been realized most fully in welfare states, but they also include the right to participate in a shared culture, as with the American civil rights movement or 'reservations' in India. Even in China, the main political struggle in the 20th century prioritized enshrining the rights of workers and peasants which became entrenched after the revolution.

Yet in recent decades, with diminished growth in high-income countries and rapidly growing inequalities – at least in China and in India – the expansion of citizenship has become increasingly constrained and in some cases reversed. In the face of these threats, right-wing populists have sought to curtail the citizenship rights of those who are not part of the 'people', such as minorities and migrant workers or foreign economies. 'Outsiders', according to populists, are to be excluded from sharing in the benefits provided by the nation-state, whether these benefits consist of social, political or civil rights – with cultural exclusion framed in terms of belongingness in the nation-state. These constraints can be traced to the end of the golden age of post-war economic growth in the late 1970s in the US and Sweden and a bit later in India and China with the 'liberalization' of their economies in the 1990s. With the cost of providing benefits or social citizenship rights to all citizens becoming less sustainable, these rights have stalled or been curtailed. Citizens have therefore been put in an increasingly precarious position vis-à-vis the demands made on their states: how will their rights be protected by the nation-state, against global economic forces and influxes from without, but also internally against the many groups that increasingly make demands on the state's resources? 'My nation first' policies provide a plausible, which is not to say effective, solution.

Against the backdrop of this general explanation, it can be seen that there are varieties of populism that depend not on economies or cultures, but on states and citizenship rights. Following on from the definition of populism, these varieties depend on who the elites and 'the people' are, as well as which groups are to be included and excluded. In the US and in Sweden, the elites that populists oppose favour open economies and borders, whereas in China and India they are – in addition – mostly corrupt. But in the US with its more market-based society, the virtuous people have a 'producerist ethos' (Judis, 2016) whereas in Sweden, with a strong state, they have created a 'people's home' (*folkhem*), a welfare state for all. Hence too in the US, exclusion is directed against the 'undeserving' and foreign manufacturing. In the more market-based American society, domestic 'othering' in particular has an ethnic dimension 'racially isolating the deserving from the undeserving in America's labour hierarchy' (Riga, 2019: 63). In Sweden, it is directed against immigrants and the demands on the state's resources.

In India, nation-building is associated with the revival of a Hindu civilization (Jaffrelot and Tillin, 2017) while in China, both nationalists and workers and peasants liberated the country from foreigners and from capitalists (Tang, 2016). In India, populism is therefore aimed against Muslims and against the unjust distribution of 'reservations', or those who would deny the greatness of India's Hindu civilization. In China, populism is similarly directed against those who would deny the country's greatness, but in addition against those who threaten social stability or would weaken the social benefits that were guaranteed as a reward for popular mobilizations. Chinese populists assert the

superiority of a nation which strengthens the rights of Han ethnics or of workers and peasants who made China great. China, incidentally, seems not to fit the definition of populism since 'the people' can hardly claim more representation in an authoritarian state. Yet the Chinese regime, too, must be responsive to demands, and certain elite factions can be more responsive to these demands while other factions are vilified for not being aggressively nationalist enough.

The elites, in all four cases, are multicultural and cosmopolitan and 'the people' are those deserving of social rights, whereas the excluded are those who are supposedly less deserving of these rights. And in all four cases, there is 'my country first' ultra-nationalism ('ultra' to distinguish it from nationalism per se). And finally, it will be readily apparent that in all four cases, populism goes beyond the traditional distinctions between left and right, even if the label 'right-wing' populism fits insofar as populist politics aim at a curtailment of rights and the institutions that protect them. Hence, too, it has been argued that populism is illiberal or a threat to democracy (Mounk, 2018) inasmuch populists want to do away with autonomous media and institutions like courts or bureaucracies that enforce and protect minority rights.

Populism thus challenges the political status quo and shifts the direction of the broader process of democratization discussed earlier away from inclusionism to exclusionism. Yet it is not just about who should be excluded but there is also variety in the 'virtuous people' that should be included more. Hence the idea of 'majority rights' has been mooted (Koopmans, 2018), which, again, could be refracted through the different systems of rights already in place: more rights for peasants and workers privileged by the state or for those who help themselves via markets in the US, or for certain Hindu caste or religious 'reservations', or for Swedes who built the 'people's home'. Populism is inclusionary as well as exclusionary. And it should be noted that these are 'claims' (though Koopmans argues they should be more); they point to who lays claim to inclusion in the '100% people' in a two-sided conflict against those who are excluded in attempts to ride roughshod over the rights of 'others'.

This explanation also leads to prognoses that depart from the economic and cultural explanations in terms of how populism is likely to be counteracted. Markets cannot mitigate the economic – but more importantly the social or cultural – divides and the threats that they pose. As we have seen, Collins also argues that markets and capitalism have a separate dynamic, and I agree: markets are orthogonal to political and cultural power and they follow a disembedding logic (Schroeder, 2013). 'The people' thus face increasing uncertainties over the rights or benefits which only the state rather than the market can guarantee. Yet the state cannot expand without additional resources such as taxes raised on the basis of greater economic growth or from the support – unlikely under current conditions – of voters endorsing tax increases. Thus the state is forced to weaken – especially social – citizenship rights. This adds an outside-in or global dimension because market forces are to some extent beyond the control of the state and the options for legitimacy in the face of this constraint are increasingly limited – which is a political constraint – though not the traditional one of geopolitical prestige or the lack thereof. The prognosis is also different from a cultural one since demands for more plural or diverse policies for identity are unlikely to be appeased unless they are recognized as rights enshrined (again) in the nation-state.

The politics of populists have been divisive; they seek change that goes beyond the traditional left/right divide. Hence explanations of populism are often couched in terms of polarization, echo chambers, filter bubbles and the like, especially in the US context. These accounts often focus on the role of the internet, and particularly the role of disinformation or how digital media make politics more extreme. And while it is true that that the authority of traditional media has declined, the major change introduced by digital media has been to provide alternative outlets to political challengers and their supporters (Schroeder, 2018: 60–81). This, too, can be more accurately described as conflict, with new challengers pushing a novel agenda against established forms of authority, including in the traditional media that still set the agenda. The conflict is not among a polarized or divided people, but between 'the people', defined in exclusionary terms, at least in the case of right-wing populism, and cosmopolitan elites who allegedly dominate established media.

Economic factors have thus played a role, but capitalism or markets have taken a long time to constrain the state's resources, so this alone cannot be an explanation of populism's recent rise. The same goes for geopolitical rise and decline. But while these patterns change slowly, the emergence and strength of populists can be linked to more proximate causes: the openings provided to populist leaders and parties and the availability of supporters who can be energized or mobilized against their enemies. Hence, too, populist support has been episodic in China, responding to corruption scandals or geopolitical 'scandals' such as the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in 1999 or Tibetan unrest or periods of aggression vis-à-vis Japan as well as the various major – often corrupt – misdeeds on the part of party elites. In India, in contrast, Hindu nationalism has been slowly gaining strength mainly against the backdrop of claims of corruption attributed primarily to the main opposition Congress party boosted by anti-Pakistan sentiment. In the US, an opening was seized in 2016 when discontent with both parties was high – even though populist support has waxed and waned even as there has been a strong undercurrent of populist support for several decades that has not found expression among the two main parties (Clagett et al., 2014). In Sweden, anti-immigrant sentiment has been simmering for more than three decades, but it was accelerated by the migrant crisis in 2015.

Geopolitical factors have also played a role, but great power prestige too has a longer timeline and it is refracted through the four cases: despite 'winning' the Cold War, the geopolitical position of the US has been in relative decline while China and India have been rising, and Sweden is part of a Europe that has agonized over its borders. Thus elites face different pressures to put their countries first and enhance their prestige. But in all four cases states are drawing up their drawbridges in response to populists' ultra-nationalist assertiveness. And it should not be surprising that great power prestige plays a greater role in the populism of the two rising powers: after all, their ascent has been rapid, during a quarter century, whereas US decline has taken three-quarters of a century. In Sweden, immigration has been a factor for decades, but the recent uptick of the refugee crises of 2015 gave a boost to populism.

What are the prospects for populism? In India and in the US, populism is leader-centric, and their support is being put to the test, though strong among a core. In Sweden, the Sweden Democrats have been kept out of government by a fragile coalition of left

and right since 2014, since when they have held the balance of power and maintained steady support. But this coalition has already shifted policy in an anti-immigrant direction to steal the Sweden Democrats' clothes. Chinese populists have been a useful resource for the regime's nationalist assertiveness, but they may be harder to tame than other dissenting voices if they get out of hand.

Populism can be counteracted by universalizing the citizenship rights provided by the state and ensuring that the rules whereby these rights – including the demands made on citizens (such as taxes) and the support provided on this basis – are transparent and fair. Hall and Lindholm say that 'Americans can and will accept compensatory policies if they are universal' (2001: 144); in other words, if they are seen as enhancing everyone's capabilities or opportunities. The same applies to the rules imposed in relation to borders and the openness of markets. The benefits of social citizenship rights could be maximized by universalizing them rather than by providing them to some at the expense of others. Yet as we have seen, the state's capacity is increasingly limited, bounded by markets on one side and the resource of legitimacy – shaped by external and internal forces – on the other. So the multiple demands that are made on the state by social movements 'from below' that claim rights have to be tailored to the varieties of populism, providing equal opportunities in the market-oriented US, equal security in the people's home in Sweden, non-discriminatory benefits in India, and fair and transparently equal treatment by the state in China. On the side of elites, universalism entails not seeking their own advantage and not favouring some groups at the expense of others, which points to the fact that democracy (or responsiveness to peoples' demands in China) is inherently an unfinished project.

The conflict arising from populism is political; it cannot be solved with new technologies or cultural shifts or improved economic growth. Extending rights further, universalizing them, while keeping open borders without national chauvinism, is possible, but not easily without sacrificing legitimacy. As a European politician put it in another context, 'we know what to do, but not how to get re-elected afterwards' (Jean-Claude Juncker, 2007, https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Jean-Claude_Juncker) – or, in the Chinese case, how to stay in power afterwards. Or, to put it in Mair's (2013) terms, the state is being hollowed out by the excessive demands made on political elites that they cannot fulfil. Put differently, the account offered here is state-centric: All groups seek rights or privileges or means to develop their capabilities (the three types of citizenship rights) from the state – there is nowhere else to seek or obtain them as neither markets nor cultural shifts will suffice. Conflict is centred on the state and its elites. And although it is a multi-sided conflict insofar as it has an internal and external dimension, it is also essentially a two-sided conflict with challengers in opposition to the politics of dominant elites and their supporters. As Collins has pointed out, there is a limited political attention space. He might recognize this contemporary reconfiguration of the political arena – he sees conflict everywhere in macro-processes – but it would require redirecting his sociological eye to do so. But I am grateful that he has provided me with some of the tools to see it.

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