

# Reflection on the Political Philosophy of American Populism

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In order to better explore and reflect on the predicament of American populism today, it is particularly important to reflect on American populism at the level of political philosophy. The political thought of American populism first comes from various political ideas of populism. However, such political ideas all originate from thinking of political philosophy. If we reflect on American populism in the field of political philosophy, we have to return to the classical democratic political philosophy and its ideas of ancient Greece. However, the return does not mean that we stick to the classical political philosophy. Therefore, this paper intends to divide and discuss in a historical way, pointing to different stages of populist political thoughts and focusing on different political philosophical thoughts: In the aspect of classical political philosophy, it focuses on political philosopher Leo Strauss' related thoughts about the ideal of western classical democracy and the distortion of modern democracy, and analyzes the concept of "political system" in detail. In aspect of recent political philosophy, it focuses on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's popular sovereignty theory, his "public will" thought and "square political theory", and expounds the "anti-theater theory" and its "anti-representative system" thought. In the aspect of modern political philosophy, it focuses on Isaiah Berlin's "liberal pluralism" and "value theory", and analyzes the multiculturalism in which the chaos of modern American politics originated.

**Keywords:** reflection, American populism, political philosophy

## Introduction

Populism is not a special phenomenon in the United States in the modern sense, but a common phenomenon rooted in the founding of the United States and repeated throughout American history. In the history of American politics and political thought, since the founding of the United States in 1776, populism has been reflected in its founding text — *the Declaration of Independence*. The concept of "equality" stated by it under liberalism, namely "all men are created equal", has a kind of radical color which is easy to trigger populism because of its natural "absolutism". In the 21st century, American populism reached its peak in the "Capitol Hill Incident" supported by "Trumpism". Admittedly, although the scale of the "Capitol Hill Incident" was not as large as that of previous populist movements, it was more serious than that of previous populism — it posed a serious threat to the stability of the traditional American political ecology under the leadership of a previous populist president. Therefore, in order to better explore and reflect on the predicament of American populism, it is particularly important to reflect on American populism at the level of political philosophy.

### **Return to Classical Political Philosophy: The Ideological Root of American Populism**

It is well known that American populism grew out of Western democracy itself. Therefore, we need to return to the beginning of western democratic politics — the political philosophy of ancient Greece on democratic political system and thoughts, to think about the source of populism. Although populism emerged from western democratic politics, it's in a symbiotic and co-existent relationship with democracy. The ancient Greek classical political philosophers did not directly explain the phenomenon of populism in their initial assumptions. According to the investigation of political philosopher Leo Strauss, the original ideal of classical democracy was very different from the actual early Athenian democracy and modern western liberal democracy. The original classical democracy, which was supposed to be the politics of a few people with political virtues and wisdom, was a kind of politics dependent on virtue — “virtuous politics” or “aristocracy”. In fact, even the practice of the original democratic politics is difficult to realize democracy, and resulted in the classical case — “*Death of Socrates*”. Moreover, modern liberal democracy has been far from the virtuous politics, it has become a kind of “popular rule” manifested as “popular culture”, and the political system does not depend on virtue. This was the beginning of the populism disease that accompanies Western democracy.

#### **The Assumption of the classical Democratic System**

Political philosopher Leo Strauss said, “One cannot know the true state of any political system without knowing the good and bad of every one.” (Leo Strauss, 2019, p. 43). Therefore, the “political system” is the guiding theme of political philosophy. In “*What is political philosophy*,” Strauss used the opening of Plato’s “Justice” to talk about legislators, as governing bodies, its character is determined by “the best political order of the whole society”, and this order is “political system” (Leo Strauss, 2003, p. 58). Since “political system” has become the guiding theme of political philosophy and human social life, “What is the best political system” is the guiding topic that classical political philosophy is always concerned with. Strauss said in the *Three Waves of Modernity*: “People must remind themselves of the fact that classical political philosophy seeks the best political order, or the best political system.” (Liu Xiaofeng, 2018, p. 39). Strauss wrote at length about the best political system in “*Natural Right and History*”. According to classical political philosophy, the best political system is “aristocracy” or “mixed political system” (Leo Strauss, 2003, p. 143).

#### **The Ideological Root of American Populism: Aristocracy (Virtuous Political System)**

The political system concerned by Strauss is the best or highest political system, and this political system is aristocracy. Aristocracy is also called “virtuous political system”, where a gentleman is an elite nobleman with noble virtues, and a “virtuous political system” is a government in which the virtuous man’s lifestyle is guaranteed. Since the political system discussed in classical political philosophy was based on this view, the aristocracy (virtuous political system) with the virtuous men as the main body becomes the ideal best system. Because of this, the design of the original democratic system was based on a “universal meritocracy”, a universal popular rule in which all or most of the adults were virtuous and wise. Therefore, the people who designed this political system naturally believed that “all or most adults have both virtue and wisdom” in this kind of political system. They are not only “virtuous” and “wise”, but also “rational”.

However, the original virtuous political system was not a “just” political system, which contained the tendency of populist thought from the beginning. First of all, how did the virtuous man get imperium? The

self-breeding of the virtuous man is not naturally higher than the vulgar. It's just birth that determines who is a virtuous man. In other words, if people are brought up in the same environment, they can all have the same upbringing. Therefore, according to the principle of "justice requires equal treatment of all people", or more precisely, according to the principle of "equality" of democracy, the "justice" of virtuous political system is not just, and it can only be regarded as an ideal city-state system. Secondly, the "freedom" on which virtuous political system depends — the freedom of virtue, which can only be possessed by a few people, belonging to a highly elite minority. It will certainly cause social antagonism and stimulate the majority of people's populist thoughts. Finally, even if the democracy of "universal virtuous government" — the democracy formed and ruled by the majority of the society, it also has to suppress the democracy of the minority in the society and become a kind of ironic populist thought. In other words, when the rights of the minority conflict with the rights of the majority, populism will coerce the values and interests of the minority.

### **The Ideological Root of American Populism: Mixed Political System**

Even if the real virtuous political system is the best or the most "mean" political system in reality, the probability of making it come true is very small. The classical political philosophers had no illusions about this either. Strauss also said that aristocracy is the best political system in theory, but it lacks "reality" in practice. The classical philosophers were never under any illusion about the probability that a truly virtuous political system would come true one day (Liu Xiaofeng, 2018, p. 331).

To the classical philosophers, the achievement of the best political system was regarded as extremely improbable. Therefore, from the perspective of practice, the classical political philosophers proposed a kind of "mixed political system" in which "the wise men" and "the people" shared power. The political system works by electing government officials and members of parliament from a group of wise men, who are required to report their duties to the people at the end of their terms. This idea evolved directly into a "mixed political system". In this system, the "Senate" was in a kind of "intermediate" position, composed of wise men.

The difference between the mixed political system and the virtuous political system is the ruling group. The main body of the mixed political system is the commercial and industrial elite, while the main body of the virtuous political system is the sage. In terms of economic sources, the ruling group of mixed political system mainly reflects the commercial interest, while the sage made a living by occupying land, the management of wealth does not consumed much of his time. In fact, the sage was the virtuous person living in the city, far from the kind of entrepreneur who consumed a lot of his time in pursuit of money. Therefore, the elite of business and industry, which occupies the Senate, is different from the virtuous political system because it is not necessarily virtuous.

Professor Liu Xiaofeng said in the article "*Strauss on Moral Education and American Political System*" that the key difference between modern republic and classical republic is the classical republic is dominated by aristocratic political elements, and the purpose of the city-state is dominated by the pursuit of virtue. The modern republic is dominated by the elements of democratic government, which defines the purpose of the state is to satisfy everyone's natural desires (Liu Xiaofeng, 2017, p. 5). The modern American political system is a mixed political system based on modern republicanism. Taking this as a benchmark, in the political system of modern America, although neoliberalism has been advocating the importance of virtue in recent years, but it still has little effect. If it does not take virtue as its purpose or direction, it will not only deviate from the original virtuous political system, but also produce populist politics and social chaos.

In short, whether it is “virtuous political system” or “mixed political system”, the Western classical political philosophers’ design of the original democratic government are too idealized. The political practice of “*Death of Socrates*” has killed the political idea of the original democratic government in its cradle. Therefore, the western democratic system was in the fissure at its beginning, and populism was born in this fissure, and gradually became a disease of the western democratic system. From this point of view, both the “virtuous political system” and the “mixed political system” have been in a state of being born and accompanied by populism.

### **Continuation of Recent Political Philosophy: The Boost of Democracy to Populism**

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was the forerunner of western democratic thought, and his thought undoubtedly promoted the democratic process of Western civilization. However, many scholars in history regarded Rousseau as the ancestor of populism. The famous philosopher Bertrand Arthur William Russell even wrote in his *History of Western Philosophy* that Hitler came from Rousseau (Russell, Bertrand, 2013, p. 439). Although the above comments on Rousseau have been always full of controversy in the academic circle, it is not unreasonable to criticize Rousseau as the “originator of populism”, because Rousseau’s political philosophy is full of paradoxes to some extent, and even promotes the progress of populism in the West.

#### **The Thought of “General Will”**

Rousseau’s democratic thought and popular sovereignty theory are mainly embodied in his thought of “General Will”. General will is not only the core concept in Rousseau’s political philosophy, but also an important part of modern populist political philosophy. However, although Rousseau mentioned general will a lot in *The Social Contract*, he did not make a complete definition of it, which also caused the continuous debate on this concept in later generations.<sup>1</sup> Generally speaking, “general will” is the “common will”, which refers to the common wishes or interests of all people. But from its depth of thought, the general will is close to the status of Plato’s Idea (Talmon, 1952 (2004), p. 44). In terms of the main idea of this article, the general will has the following characteristics, which are highly compatible and sustains the generation of populism.

**Firstly, people and sovereignty.** The subject and object of the implementation of Rousseau’s “general will” are the people, and the people which occupy the majority in number, are also the objects that populism relies on and emphasizes all the time. In Rousseau’s time, the majority of people in quantity were peasants. In *A Letter to D’Alembert on Appreciation*, Rousseau pointed out the importance of farmers. He believed that agriculture was the oldest and noblest human occupation, and farmers were the most honest and useful people (Rousseau, 1994, p. 23). Rousseau warned that the influence of parties representing special interests would impede the public discussion, such public discussion might lead to a consensus on the well-being of all. Each person must fully surrender his or her own interests to society as a whole and pursue the welfare of the whole society (Zhu Xueqin, 1994, p. 84). **Secondly, universality and compulsiveness.** Rousseau argued that in order to achieve true general will, it must come from and apply to all people. There were both substantive and formal aspects to this idea. Formally, Rousseau believed that the application of law must be common and general, and its scope must be universal. Although the law cannot name an individual by name, it must apply to everyone. Rousseau’s hope was that while citizens are constantly thinking about what is good for their private interests,

<sup>1</sup> There are several schools of thought about Rousseau’s “general will”. For details, see: Joseph Reiser (2010). “General Will”. In Bevir, Mark (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Political Theory*, pp. 551–553.

they have a larger general will at work. In this way, citizens can support or protect the common and private interests impartially, guided by the general will, without burdelling or interfering with the law. **Thirdly, nationality and monism.** Rousseau, in one of his letters, made it very clear that the general will is the will of a particular nation rather than the general will of the whole human race (Rousseau, 1994, p. 34). In this sense, Rousseau's general will belongs to a particular political or national community which emphasizes the importance of insisting on national particularity, and further emphasizes that national character should not be absorbed in "cosmopolitan universalism" (Rousseau, 1994, p. 133). In fact, it also strengthened the generation of populism based on nationalism, the national general will has natural rationality and legitimacy which further promoted the generation of a series of populist behaviors in the form of xenophobia. **Fourthly, equality and morality.** Rousseau's thought of people's equality, to be specific, is a kind of collective equality thought that sacrifices individual freedom. Rousseau's collectivism was reflected in the discussion of the general will in his landmark work — *The Social Contract*, and also in *Emile*. In *The Social Contract*, he said, "human beings are united and cooperate together through social contract, and all the rights of each individual are all transferred to the whole collective." (Rousseau, 1980, p. 23). In another work, *Emile*, he also noted that the general will "always leans towards equality" (Rousseau, 1978, p. 414). The culmination of this egalitarian thinking is today's "multiculturalism" and populism in the United States. "Morality" here refers to Rousseau's concept of "moral citizenship". "General will" refers to the people or citizens as the subject, and this kind of citizen, Rousseau called "moral citizen". Rousseau believed that the masses at the bottom were the group with virtue, and distinguished mass civilization from urban civilization. This surely fits the "moral homogeneity" of populism. Populists believe that the people they represent are morally homogenous and pure, and they are naturally weak, while the elites they oppose are morally flawed. As a result, populists believe that their populist movements have a natural "moral legitimacy".

The above mentioned "people and sovereignty", "universality and compulsiveness", "nationality and monism" and "equality and morality" of the general will, and briefly elaborated the conceptual part of the convergence of the general will and populism. However, the populist color of the general will is also directly expressed in the form and implementation, namely the "square politics" advocated by Rousseau, the "anti-theater theory" and "anti-representative government theory" contained therein.

### **"Square Politics": Rousseau's Anti-Representative Politics**

Square politics has been reflected in ancient Greece. In Plato's relevant writings, people gathered in the square for political discussion or assembly. However, since modern times, square politics has further evolved into people's demonstrations and gatherings. But no matter what changes, square politics has always been a highly democratic form of citizens' direct participation in politics. This is because what square politics opposes is "theater politics", that is a politics of institutionalization, organization, and hierarchy. Rousseau's theory of "square politics" begins with his "anti-theatre theory", which directly points to the western representative political system.

#### **"Anti-Theatre Theory" and "Square Politics"**

"Anti-theater theory" is also known as "theater effect theory" in academic circles. Rousseau did not actually put forward this concept, it was refined by later scholars. This important political philosophical issue hidden in "*Letter to M. D'Alembert on Spectacles*", Rousseau and his friends exploring the issue — "Should a

theater should be built in Geneva” (Rousseau, 1994, p. 126). Therefore, this letter constituted an important part of Rousseau’s political philosophy. In Rousseau’s opinion, performance in a theater needs actors and audiences, this kind of exchange of roles in theater is actually a reflection of the exchange of positions in political life. Theater is a place of performance, but also a place of distortion of human nature, because the performance of drama itself is full of falseness. In addition, the majority of civic morality was shaped by imitation, but the form of drama has a bad impact on the moral imitation of citizens, which has extremely bad consequences on the moral atmosphere of the society, and directly threatens the order of the political community. Therefore, Rousseau actually held this view of “opposing the construction of a theater in Geneva”. In fact, Rousseau was not only against the construction of the theatre as a practical place, but also against the form of drama which undermines humanity, morality and the general will.<sup>2</sup>

Rousseau’s “anti-theater theory” was actually aimed at the representative system of the West, leading him to directly put forward the “square politics theory”. Rousseau believed that square politics, due to its directness, openness and transparency, is conducive to the direct expression of political views and tendencies so that the theory of people’s democracy and sovereignty could be truly expressed. Square politics suggests “some possible meeting between heart and will, emotion and reason, passion and virtue, in which freedom is experienced again as something spontaneous” (Daniel E. Cullen, 1993, p. 124). In the square, the representative (actors) and the represented (audience) become one, and the system of representative, political party and separation of powers is integrated into one. For Rousseau, square politics showed democracy incisively and vividly.

### **Anti-Representative Politics and Anti-Representative Government Theory**

Rousseau’s thought of “square politics” directly deconstructed modern western democratic politics, which was embodied in the deconstruction of the institutional structure that Western democratic politics depended on, such as “representative system”, “separation of powers” and “party system”. In Rousseau’s opinion, representative system is actually people’s theater in the field of political practice. In the theatre of a representative house, the representative (MP) and the represented (citizen) are actors and audiences of each other, just as the audience watches the actors performing on the stage, the representative (MP) and the represented (citizen) constantly stimulate and provoke the tear of the general will, moral and political community. Therefore, Rousseau opposed representative system and representative government, believing that representative system is a symbol of regression of democracy, morality and freedom. Representative government is contrary to the will of the people, freedom and democracy.

After criticizing representative politics, Rousseau strongly criticized representative government and separation of powers at that time. We can see it from *The Social Contract* — However, our political commentators, unable to distinguish sovereignty in principle, have divided it in object: they have divided it into force and will, into legislative and executive powers, into taxation, judicial and war powers, and into internal and diplomatic powers. Sometimes they lump these parts together and sometimes they take them apart. They make a patchwork monster of the sovereignty, as if they had made one man out with different eyes, arms, and feet, and nothing more, and nothing more (Rousseau, 1980, p. 25).

Here we actually touch the core of Rousseau’s political philosophy — the division of power. Due to

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<sup>2</sup> On Rousseau’s “Anti-Theater Theory”, Domestic scholars’ Comments and research Reference: He Fangying, *Rousseau’s Mask: On Theater and Enlightenment Drama*, Chengdu: Sichuan People’s Publishing House, 2020.

sovereignty belongs to the people and the general will, the government represented by representative system was criticized by Rousseau. At this time, we have to analyze the relationship and difference between popular sovereignty and government in Rousseau's political philosophy, in order to clarify the origin of populism in his theory.

**Table 1 The Relationship and Difference Between Rousseau's Popular Sovereignty and Government**

Types of Authority	Subject of authority	Time and form	Authority level	Procedures and organization
Popular Sovereignty	The people	Regular or irregular gatherings	high	low
Government	Government and its heads	Continuous existence	Middle	Middle

We can see from the table, the people and their regular assemblies (square politics) are superior to the government in the hierarchy of authority, but inferior to the government in time and form, procedure, and organization. From this point of analysis, the populist color in Rousseau's political philosophy is emerging once again--populism refers to elevating people to a level of unmatched authority, but the relevant organizations of populism are aggregated in a non-professional or non-organizational way.

In short, Rousseau's theory of "square politics" undoubtedly endows populists' violent rallies without political legal procedures with theoretical rationality and legitimacy. Rousseau believed that whether representative government or other governments, they are all temporary and need to be affirmed and supported by the people. Representative legislatures cannot determine the general will because the social contract depends on the unanimous consent of all the Ruled. Since sovereignty is not concentrated in one person or an elite, it is concentrated in all the people of the state, the general will of sovereignty can only be fully determined politically in the square — the assembly of all the people.

### **Reexamining Modern Political Philosophy: The Promotion of Modern Liberalism to Populism**

To some extent, modern political philosophy is constructed by criticizing Rousseau's political philosophy. Isaiah Berlin succeeded Rousseau's thought of freedom and value with his "Two Kinds of Freedom" and his "Theory of Value". In short, Berlin's contribution to the field of political philosophy was its development of important theories such as "the division of two concepts of freedom" and "value pluralism", and summed up the above thoughts into "Liberal Pluralism", a uniquely representative theory of liberalism (Isaiah Berlin, 2003, pp. 186–246).

#### **Two Types of Freedom and Definitions**

Berlin's most famous idea of political philosophy is its distinction between "positive liberty" and "negative liberty". Although Berlin's distinction between the two types of freedom has small deviation in different writings, in general, he defined positive liberty as the ability to pursue and achieve goals, and can also be defined as autonomy rather than depend on others. Negative freedom is defined as the ability to act without coercion or interference from external political institutions (Isaiah Berlin, 2003, pp. 36, 46). As a matter of fact, the division of the two concepts of freedom made by Berlin is not rooted in itself, it can be traced back to the source of the history of political philosophy. He traced positive freedom back to Rousseau's theory of freedom, which focuses on individuals autonomy or the ability of self-rule. In Berlin's view, Rousseau equated freedom

with autonomy and further equated autonomy with submission to the so-called “general will”, and this conceptual equivalence and conversion was particularly dangerous, because the general will is quite independent and guided, and often contradicts individual’s private will. Therefore, Berlin argued that Rousseau’s theory of freedom is concerned with the best interests of citizens, but it ultimately pointed to the best interests of “common or public”. Berlin asserted that Rousseau’s accusation of the selfish will of the individual is an illusion, an attempt to elevate the absolute meaning of freedom that ultimately leads to its absolute sanctification or religitization. Berlin defined Rousseau as “freedom’s most insidious and dangerous enemy” (Isaiah Berlin, 2005, p. 31). Berlin believed that Rousseau’s theory of freedom was a theory of positive freedom, while Berlin himself held more criticism of positive freedom, believing that the interpretation of positive freedom represented by Rousseau ultimately led to absolutism and totalitarianism (Yu Wanhui, 2010, pp. 39–45).

As for negative freedom, in *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, a book by Ramin Jahanberru, Berlin admitted that he actually favored negative freedom over positive freedom (Ramin Jahanberru, 2011, p. 133). Berlin’s definition of negative freedom comes from Hobbes’ definition of freedom, which he related negative freedom to the liberal tradition that emerged and developed in England and France from the 17th to early 19th centuries. In this period, the freedom in the social context of these two countries is freedom of resistance — negative freedom without interference by others.

From the above analysis of Berlin’s “division of the two concepts of freedom”, to some extent, it can be seen that Berlin actually transformed or equated freedom with a kind of ability (Zhao Tingyang, 2008, p. 9). Positive freedom is the ability to control authority, while negative freedom is the ability to get rid of authority. However, if freedom is regarded as an ability, then this ability is very likely to lurk in the tendency of “power” and “authoritarianism”. We can find that both the pro-positive and pro-negative freedom groups have one thing in common, that is, each side equates its own concept of freedom with the real concept of freedom, and regards the other side as a false or incomplete one, negative freedom and positive freedom are all likely to reduce “true freedom”. This further indicates that although Berlin’s “distinction between two freedoms” is a purely intellectual analysis of the concept of freedom, it may evolve into a tool of party or power, and further lead to the propagation of liberalism (Putterman Theodore L., 2006, pp. 416–446). Nowadays, American populists often carry out populist activities under the banner of “freedom”, and this freedom is reflected in both positive and negative freedom. For example, during the epidemic, many Americans held a series of populist demonstrations, demonstrating with the negative freedom slogans of “against vaccination” or “against daily mask wearing”, or believing that they had the positive freedom of “breathing freely” or “going out freely”, which further resulted in the large-scale generation of populism in the United States.

### **Value Pluralism**

Berlin’s two general theories of freedom introduce the concept of “pluralism” into the elaboration of liberalism, and the prominent manifestation of pluralism in liberalism is his “value theory”. In exploring the philosophers who participated in the Enlightenment or held Enlightenment ideas, Berlin found a common feature in their thoughts, that is, they all held a deep “monism” belief in the interpretation of their theories. Based on this belief, there must be a single answer to all social and philosophical questions. Berlin was deeply suspicious of this Platonic idea. The reason is that the value of the plural form is not incommensurable, and often cause the conflict of human society. Berlin believed that we do have multiple values, and the denial of



these internal value conflicts will only lead to conflicts between individuals and political communities, and further lead to the tragedy of totalitarianism in human life again. Therefore, Berlin called for strong resistance to the temptation of monism and shift to the open and inclusive dimension of “value pluralism” (Isaiah Berlin, 2003, pp. 241–255).

According to Berlin, value pluralism is humane and does not “deprive people of their lives in the name of distant and inconsistent ideals” (Isaiah Berlin, 2003, p. 245). Moreover, values are human creations, not natural products waiting to be discovered. Berlin held a view of value pluralism and argued that moral values may be equal, to be precise, they are incommensurable, valid and incompatible. Thus, without reference in a particular decision, moral values may conflict with each other in an insoluble way. Moral conflict is “an inherent and irreducible element of human life”. “The collision of these values is human nature.” (Berlin, Isaiah, 1997, p. 238). From the above analysis, it can be seen that there are inherent contradictions and tensions in Berlin’s value pluralism. But in fact, Berlin’s construction of the self-consistency of its theory, to some extent, is trapped in a strange circle. In order to insist on value pluralism, so as to exclude “positive freedom”, instead, its rejection of positive freedom depends on the insistence of “negative freedom”. Therefore, Berlin had a strong monistic tendency in his discourse, which was actually rejected by himself. The contradictions within Berlin’s theory have led to the increasingly intense contradictions between political reality and practice. The pluralism tendency behind value pluralism further leads to the emergence of the new trend of American populism. In fact, today’s American populism is divided into two different populist forces.

### **The Origins of Populism Under Multiculturalism**

In *Unfinished Dialogue*, Berlin pointed to a factual link between liberalism and pluralism (Isaiah Berlin, 2014, pp. 305–306). At the moment, multiculturalism in America leads directly to two extremes of populism: the populism of multiculturalism and the populism of Anti-multiculturalism.

#### **The Populism That Adheres to Multiculturalism**

Despite the outbreak of multiculturalism in various fields in the United States in the 1970s, it is difficult still to define “multiculturalism” precisely (Donald H. Roy, 1996, p. 217). Scholar Han Jiabing pointed out that although the so-called “multiculturalism” contains cultural content, it goes beyond the traditional cultural field and directs to related demands in the political field (Han Jiabing, 2006, p. 4). This insight is undoubtedly quite accurate, because “multiculturalism” is developed in the form of political and social practice.

In fact, nowadays, American multiculturalism has evolved into a pursuit of diversity at the expense of national and social integrity, as well as the identity of the nation and mainstream culture. The loss of these foundations further harms the continuous appeal for individual rights and freedoms, indicating the continuous impact and decline of traditional American culture. It also shows that pluralism is the soil for populism in today’s United States. Scholar Cong Riyun listed four basic principles of Western populism under multiculturalism, namely, “The more equality, the better. The more free, the better. The more democratic, the better. The more pluralistic, the better.” (Cong Riyun, 2020, pp. 118–137). These four basic principles are fairly in line with the basic status quo of American populism today. More specifically, today’s American multiculturalism will lead to the increasing generalization of equality and the pursuit of radical egalitarianism, and freedom is breaking boundaries and becoming more powerful. Democracy evolved from a minority democracy in ancient Greece to a mass democracy and then to a populist democracy. The pursuit of infinite

pluralism and endow it with morality, it is called "political correctness" in today's popular phrase. These four basic principles eventually produce an American populism that insisted on multiculturalism. It should be noted that this form of populism does not constitute the whole of American populism, only accounts for its mainstream status.

### **Anti-Multiculturalist Populism**

Anti-multiculturalism populists believe that multiculturalism puts cultures on an equal footing, argues that culture is plural rather than singular, and there is no distinction between advanced and backward, good and bad, beautiful and ugly. Multiculturalism overemphasizes the value of cultural diversity, and believes that diversity itself is worth pursuing. As a result, multiculturalism tries to depress mainstream culture and constantly elevates and praises various cultures of ethnic minorities (including non-mainstream political groups such as black equality groups, feminist groups and sexual minorities) as well as those of socially disadvantaged and marginalized groups. Finally, the mainstream culture of the United States has been seriously eroded, deconstructed and weakened, resulting in the crisis and decline of the foundation of American civilization.

The typical representative for the anti-multiculturalist populists is Donald Trump, the 45th president of the United States. As we all know, Trump is often characterized by scholars as a right-wing populist. Right-wing populism focuses on its own nationality and traditional culture, and has a strong "xenophobic" feature. Right-wing populism values people's ethnic and blood identity, the so-called localism — those who are "born and bred" (Liu Yong, 2009, p. 52), Anti-multiculturalist populists see these minorities or political groups as contrary to the traditional culture or ideas that populism upholds. In fact, by analyzing the first form of American populism, we already knew that those minorities or political groups that adhere to multiculturalism were also likely to evolve into populism. Thus, when anti-multiculturalist populists come into conflict with multiculturalist populists, populists of different positions will adopt the same strategy of using values, morals, and violence to coerce the other side.

In this analysis, another feature of American populism has emerged — identity politics. Driven by cultural pluralism, the identity politics of populism focuses on the identity "group" rather than the "individual", which itself has the tendency of anti-individualism. Regardless of race, gender, religion, or emerging political or social minorities such as LGBT, various groups "participate" in the existing political agenda in different capacities, and these groups do not care much about whether they should "participate" in legal ways. However, Anti-multiculturalism populists have mostly fought in vain against this pluralism. In today's America, "political correctness" has become the "norm", and "identity" has indeed spreading to the field of political practice and exists objectively in two sides of the political spectrum.

### **Conclusion**

Through the longitudinal analysis of the vein of American populism in Western political philosophy and the investigation of American populism in political philosophy, we can find that populism is not only the "democracy's shadow", but also the "bane of democracy" rooted in western democratic politics since ancient Greece. In other words, Western populism and democratic politics were in a state of "twin" at the beginning of Western civilization, and then continued in a state of "concomitancy". The reason why the above philosophers and their political philosophy are selected is that Strauss's debate on the ancient and modern democratic political system reveals the origin of the classical democratic political system of populism from the side, while

the thoughts of the other two political philosophers have contributed to the generation of populism in the modern sense to varying degrees. In short, by reflecting on the political philosophy of American populism, it can be seen that American populism, which has evolved so far, has a long history in the source of western political philosophy, which is also an ideological resource for us to reflect on political philosophy. In addition, in the course of western political civilization, populism has its corresponding political thought stage, and the political philosophy thought involved in it is not the same. Through the analysis of the “history of ideas” from the emergence of American political society, and then the reflection of western democratic thought to the “history of ideas”, we push the reflection of American populism to a deeper stage of political philosophy. In the real world politics, today’s American populism is sweeping in with the universal slogan of “freedom and democracy”, which makes non-western countries face a tense state of survival, so that we have to reflect on the political philosophy of American populism, in order to maintain due vigilance.

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