

RESEARCH HANDBOOK ON **Populism**

Edited by
Yannis Stavrakakis
Giorgos Katsambekis



RESEARCH HANDBOOK ON POPULISM

RESEARCH HANDBOOKS IN POLITICAL THOUGHT

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Research Handbook on Populism

Edited by

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As this *Research Handbook* was entering the production stage, we were notified that one of our contributors, Niko Hatakka, had passed away. His chapter in this volume will always remind us of his many talents and academic achievements.

Introduction: populism's enduring relevance and the challenges ahead

Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis

POPULISM RESEARCH: BOOMING AND MATURATION

Around ten years ago, we were kicking off a research project – POPULISMUS – noting that populism was ‘dynamically and unexpectedly back on the agenda’.¹ Looking back, it would not be an exaggeration to say that populism has not been off the agenda ever since, and this despite its ups and downs.² Just consider the sequence from the ebbing of the Pink Tide in Latin America around the early/mid-2010s, to the brief ‘spring’ of the populist radical left and the resurgence of the populist radical right in Europe after the economic crisis of 2008–2010 and the so-called ‘refugees crisis’ of 2015, to earthquake political events like Brexit and the election of Trump in the United States in 2016; and from there back to the recent (and rather partial) rejuvenation of left-wing populism in Latin America, exemplified by the return of left-Peronists to power in Argentina. It seems that political debates, globally, cannot take place without somehow also taking into account populist dynamics. Interestingly, even when populism does not play a major, or indeed hardly any, role during certain critical junctures – as seems to have happened during the long peak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2020) – pundits, media outlets and sometimes even scholars still find a way to reinsert it into the discussion, with its ‘death’ or impressive re-emergence often being treated as equally probable prospects, feeding into and sustaining a persisting ‘populist hype’ (Glynos and Mondon 2019).

This ever growing and enduring interest in populism is not only reflected in media coverage, public discussions and punditry, but also in scholarly research, academic events and bibliographical production. Populism now constitutes one of the richest and fastest-growing areas of study within political science, especially visible in comparative politics, but also very vibrant in political theory and currently expanding in international relations and beyond. Many have even gone so far as to suggest that ‘populism studies’ has formed its own distinct research area (Rooduijn 2019),³ with universities across Europe and the Americas introducing relevant specialized modules for undergraduate and postgraduate students, while major scientific associations are forming specialist groups devoted to the study of the phenomenon.⁴ This trend is also affecting other social sciences.

As a result of this growing and sustained interest, the field has substantially expanded in scope, advanced in new theoretical and empirical directions and matured in developing common codes and reflexive (even self-critical) awareness. We might take it for granted, today, that when attending relevant scientific meetings we can speak about ‘populism’ and mean, more or less, something similar; however, it was only a few decades back that such events resembled peculiar Babel Towers, with researchers often talking past each other and struggling to reach a common understanding of the contested concept and the issues at stake (Ionescu and Gellner 1969). We would thus be reflecting an emerging consensus among schol-

ars if we suggested that today populism is broadly understood as *a distinct form of politics that champions ‘the people’ and their sovereignty while antagonizing political – and/or other – ‘elites’ or a multi-faceted ‘establishment’ that are seen as unresponsive to popular needs and aspirations* (see Moffitt 2020; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Ostiguy et al. 2021; Stavrakakis et al. 2018). And this kind of politics, if we take into account the key strands and relevant traditions in the literature, may be understood mostly as a form of *discourse* (Laclau 2005), an *ideology* (Mudde 2017), a *style* (Moffitt 2016) or a *strategy* (Weyland 2017).⁵

However, this emerging consensus has not only touched conceptual and definitional matters; a similar movement (be it more fragmented and sometimes rather reluctant) can also be observed at the normative level, that is, in the ways we understand populism’s relation to democracy. In this front, a substantial part of the field seems to have moved on from straightforward pathologizing perspectives on the phenomenon, towards more nuanced and flexible positions, acknowledging that populism is ambiguous in its relationship to democracy; neither primarily – or always – a threat, disease or menacing danger, nor mostly a panacea or miraculous cure for the ills of representative democracy, but potentially both or none (Canovan 1999; Moffitt 2020; Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; see also Lucardie, this volume). Indeed, populism is nowadays better seen as a form of politics that could potentially help radicalize and deepen democracy, when enhancing inclusion and expanding the scope of representation, but also as eroding, if not reversing, democratization when it adopts an exclusionary understanding of the political community and develops authoritarian tendencies (Katsambekis 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013).

PERSISTING CHALLENGES

This does not mean that stereotypical and/or pathologizing approaches to populism do not keep resurfacing, often becoming quite popular, constituting thus a key challenge for today’s scholarship. After all, such usually simplifying and even alarmist perspectives, that pit the caricature of a ‘populist monster’ against an idealized ‘paradise’ of liberal democracy (however the latter might be perceived), seem to be much more compatible with the way that contemporary mass media operate, hence they tend to attract attention and gain traction, even when populism is hardly their actual focus.

Admittedly, then, the optimism of creating some common ground, maturing and producing a critical mass of theoretical knowledge and empirical data in the field of populism research is balanced by the realities of emerging new problems and challenges that stem from the public uses, misuses and overextension of the term, the conceptual stretching that tends to appear at and affect different levels of public discourse and debate (academic, media, politics, etc.), and the persistent return of various stereotypes and biases. And this is important for various reasons. For one, if populist phenomena can tell us something about the quality of democratic representation and the overall vibrancy or health of democracy (see Canovan 1999; Panizza 2005; Roberts 2015), then maybe the way that we talk about populism, ‘the people’ and their sovereignty (populism scholarship), can tell us something equally important (see De Cleen et al. 2018).

At the same time, new dimensions of the phenomenon emerge and new cases are highlighted globally, calling for more comprehensive modes of theorization, which often involve new transdisciplinary orientations.

FINDING OUR SPOT: THE ASPIRING CONTRIBUTION OF THIS RESEARCH HANDBOOK

It is at this juncture that this *Research Handbook* is positioned with the aim to: (1) take stock of the crucial production of knowledge thus far – in a way that is both appreciative of key advances and alert to limitations and tensions; (2) map main orientations in both theoretical scrutiny and empirical research; (3) register major findings in various sub-fields and important regions of the world; and finally (4) open up the way for future research with regards to key challenges that remain to be tackled in a spirit of methodological pluralism and epistemological cross-fertilization. Many of the chapters that follow help clarify definitional issues in a more rigorous way; others introduce robust typologies that help register and interpret the variability and often antithetical implications of populism(s). The long and sometimes forgotten history of past theorizations of the phenomenon is revisited and important work from different regions or disciplinary and theoretical traditions that is not easily accessible is highlighted.

At any rate, and since this is a *Research Handbook*, the emphasis is placed in highlighting cutting-edge research methods, directions and challenges that open themselves up once conceptual reflexivity, theoretical rigour, comparative and historical alertness are established as guiding principles in populism research. This is currently attempted globally by a host of established scholars, early-career academics and young researchers. Without neglecting well-established approaches, our aim has been to unify all these forces to produce something occasionally different, often challenging and presumably refreshing within populism research. Something able to enlist diverse sensibilities, activate novel angles and toolkits, produce new and inspiring knowledge and generate a more comprehensive interpretation of the phenomenon and its various implications. Taken together, such innovations may even indicate a paradigm shift towards increasing complexity and greater pluralism slowly encompassing the field that may fully manifest itself in the years to come. Early signs of this movement are there to be registered already. This *Research Handbook* is premised on the idea that this is a movement to be welcomed and encouraged, not to be repressed and silenced by disciplinary, perspectival and methodological gate-keeping. Only the embrace of this movement – even, in fact especially, when it shakes knowledge that is often taken for granted without much scrutiny – will advance research in this field in often unexpected but rigorous and productive directions able to move forward both scientific inquiry and the broader democratic political culture in times of consecutive and overlapping crises.

Our commitment to capturing the novelties, blossoming pluralism and critical advances in the field of populism research is not only reflected in the thematic priorities, the scientific planning, structure and overall organization of the *Research Handbook*, but also in the identification and involvement of a group of scholars that helps to better capture the said developments. This group is truly global and indeed highly diverse, representing scholars from different regions around the world, that range from people who are just now finishing their doctoral research projects to well-established senior colleagues with a long trajectory already behind them. Contributors to this *Research Handbook* also cover a very broad disciplinary spectrum, ranging from history, constitutionalism and the arts to political science, sociology, anthropology and beyond, and specialize in varying methods and theoretical traditions, from political theory and ethnography, to comparative politics and quantitative methods. Every effort was made to keep the list of authors as gender-balanced as possible, but we do acknowledge that we could have done even better in this respect. In any case, it needs to be stressed that

despite substantial improvements in recent years, the field of populism research remains quite Western-centric and male-dominated and a lot of work still needs to be done in the direction of enhanced inclusiveness and pluralism, towards which we hope that this *Research Handbook* constitutes a small and modest, yet meaningful contribution.

NAVIGATING THE *RESEARCH HANDBOOK*: ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE

Setting out to accomplish the goals of this *Research Handbook* was no small task. It required the patient rereading and re-evaluation of existing knowledge through a contemporary lens that is transhistorical, comparative and indeed global. After all, one of the main lessons learned in recent decades is that populism should not be viewed through restrictive and limiting frameworks of temporal or regional exceptionalism. It is not (just) particular regions or ‘moments’ that give rise to populism. Rather, we are dealing with a phenomenon that goes hand in hand with democratic representation and (perceptions of) popular sovereignty from their very inception; hence its traces, or early seeds, can be found as far back as ancient Athens and Rome, and from there to plebeian revolts in France and England between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries and agrarian radicalization in Russia and the United States in the mid- and late nineteenth century, before reaching the more familiar, to us, contemporary era that is defined by party politics (see, for example, the chapters by Tarragoni; Mylonas and Guerra; Postel, this volume). Differently put, traces of populism can be sought at every historical instance in which claims and appeals start to formulate in the name of the ‘many’, those that form the legitimization basis for any democratically ruled polity, against the privileged few, the elites in positions of power.

In order to embark on such an ambitious project certain common codes are needed to anchor research around recurring notions and themes: *democracy’s* ever evolving, contentious and constitutionally incomplete nature that will always give rise to expanding representational claims in the name of ‘the people’; *the people’s* function as a common point of identification, of inclusion and exclusion, as well as its historical co-constitution with other key, yet distinct, positionalities, like the *nation*; the ever persisting struggle between the oligarchic/elitist spirit and the popular/democratic drive in human societies, that often manifests as a divide between anti-populism and populism in today’s globalized world. The first part of the *Research Handbook* (‘Concepts’) deals with and clarifies such key concepts to chart some fundamental common coordinates – or conceptual family resemblances – before moving on to surveying some of the diachronic historical milestones in understanding populism.

The second part of the *Research Handbook*, entitled ‘Diachronies’, aims to familiarize readers with the long but often forgotten genealogy of populist movements, leaders and parties in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and even further back, in order to chart the long global trajectories marking the phenomenon and formulate an adequate understanding of the historic populist canon. Being alert to the presence of a ‘populist sensibility’⁶ that can be traced as far back as the Athenian *polis* and republican Rome, the section covers the ‘usual suspects’, such as the Russian *Narodniki* and the American People’s Party in the nineteenth century, but also the defining populist movement for Latin America, Peronism, while paying attention to historical genealogies of populism in Italy and France, revealing both important continuities and legacies but also enduring misconceptions that might require revisiting. What

makes the approach in this section distinct from other works that aim to illuminate the historical background to the phenomenon is our effort to view populism through a lens that is both truly diachronic as well as critical in a multi-level manner, following a thread from the distant past to today's politics, thus highlighting the significance of certain moments from the past – and their distinct representations within historical memory – for a history of the present – and vice versa.

Up to this point, populism in the *Research Handbook* is surveyed through a rather straightforward toolkit, as the reader becomes equipped with basic concepts and is given an outline of the relevant historical background and basic populist lineages. The third part ('Theories and key thinkers') aims to add an extra layer of complexity and critical reflexivity, by focusing on the most important theorists, analytical traditions, broader schools of thought and most established definitions in the field. It starts with the work of Richard Hofstadter in the 1950s, and its legacy (Jäger, this volume), as, despite its shortcomings, contradictions and refutations, it seems to still substantially influence contemporary approaches to the populist phenomenon, having endowed them not only with an anti-populist bias, but also with persisting stereotypes regarding populism's alleged irrational and anti-intellectual nature and supposed proneness to conspiratorial thinking. Jäger's chapter contextualizes Hofstadter's work and highlights, among others, how it formed a historiography that was politically engaged with its present, hence reflecting and participating in its stakes and conflicts; something that one can also observe today. Part III also covers the intellectual trajectory of Margaret Canovan, revealing that she was not as uncontroversial as many would have assumed (Aslanidis, this volume), to then move on to unpacking the most important, and currently relevant, theoretical and analytical approaches to studying populism: the discursive or discourse-theoretical approach, the foundations of which were laid by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, the ideational approach that has been largely influenced by Cas Mudde, the political-strategic approach as developed by Kurt Weyland (authoring the chapter in this volume) and the socio-cultural approach put forward by Pierre Ostiguy (co-authoring the chapter in this volume).

Something that seems to be observable here is that the dynamics currently marking the field may signify a shift towards studying populism most crucially at the level of discourse, broadly defined. The latter is, importantly, not reducible to language (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000: 3–4) as it incorporates (organizes and energizes) ideas, frames, performative (and socio-culturally salient as well as class-related) elements, socially/politically meaningful behaviours, strategies and symbolic/affective practices (among others).

The fourth part, entitled 'Disciplinary angles', engages with the diverse and expanding scope of disciplines (and sub-disciplines) that have been involved in researching populist phenomena, covering international relations and foreign policy, political economy and ethnography, legal studies and constitutional theory, discourse studies and historiography. This not only allows us to map main orientations and register key advances in different fields, introducing readers to different perspectives and analytical tools, but also discern emerging common themes, converging threads and focal points that can facilitate research that is both cross- and inter-disciplinary.

After laying some theoretical and methodological orientations for innovative and inter-disciplinary research on populism and attempting to capture the richness and diversity of the field, the fifth part ('Research agendas in the social sciences') switches gear, to make room for more focused treatments of the most important research agendas within the social sciences and, especially, political science, which is, after all, the disciplinary area that has clearly dom-

inated populism research in recent decades. The role that populism has played in shaping our understanding of party politics and political systems is highlighted here, engaging with standard analytical tools in the field, such as cleavage theory, while the classic discussion around charisma and leadership is seen and problematized in a new light. Populism is also discussed from the viewpoint of social movements, political communication, passions and emotions, psychoanalytic political theory and public attitudes, as studied through survey methods.

The sixth part ('Comparisons and typologies') moves on to developing a series of comparisons and typologies, differentiating between left and right, exclusionary and inclusionary or 'punching upwards' and 'punching downwards' populisms, populisms in government and in opposition, populisms that are democratic or undemocratic and, finally, populisms that can develop at different levels in relation to the nation (national, international, transnational). Especially in relation to the latter, it is important, in an era of globalization and multi-level government, in times of de facto transnational politics, to be able to conceive popular appeals and political projects beyond the confines of the nation state (Panayotu, in this volume). Taken together, and apart from their specific contributions, the chapters in these last few parts (along with several others across the *Research Handbook*) seem to confirm that populism, despite its specificities and peculiarities, is indeed a rather 'normal' and widespread feature of (representative) politics; one that manifests regularly at different levels of social and political mobilization, across the ideological-political spectrum, within different institutional settings and varying levels of political activity and social organization.

The seventh part ('Hotspots') adopts the classic format of region-specific chapters, delving into the peculiarities of contemporary populist politics in areas that have been considered 'hotspots' for the phenomenon. The standard periodization of Latin American populisms is recontextualized through a problematization of euro-centrism; Europe is grouped in the rather converging Central and Eastern European experiences, on the one hand, and the more pluralistic and often contrasting brands of populism found in the North and South of the continent. Southeast Asia's rich tradition of populist politics is also highlighted, along with the (often overlooked) legacy of populism in Africa, both of which are particularly important for better understanding the relationship between colonialism and populism and in challenging Western-centric biases. We consciously did not include a chapter on the United States in this part, as the country is already adequately covered in other parts of the *Research Handbook* (not to mention massively overrepresented in the broader field of populism research) and we wanted to avoid repetition as much as possible (see the chapters by Postel and Mazzarella, this volume).

The *Research Handbook* concludes with a substantive section on research challenges at the cutting edge of the field. The relation between populism, gender and feminism is reviewed through a critical discussion of the relevant literature and the development of a normative argument on the possibility (and experiences) of a populist feminism (Cadahia, this volume). An important framework for critically understanding and problematizing the ways that we speak about populism at different levels of social and political interaction (politics, media, academia) is introduced through the elaboration of the concept of the 'populist hype' (Goyvaerts et al., this volume). The concept of the commons is brought to the fore, highlighting fruitful convergences and complementarities between the politics of commoning and democratic populism(s) (Kiouпкиolis, this volume). The relationship between the figure of the 'expert' and populism, dramatically brought back to the centre of attention after the recent COVID-19 pandemic, is analysed through a performative-relational lens (Sunnercrantz, this volume). Finally,

colonialism, religion, the role of digital media and the global diffusion of populist discourses, as well as the significance of music and the arts for populism, are duly covered.

Needless to say, we have structured the *Research Handbook* having a specific logic in mind and forming a sequence of chapters that we consider reasonable, illuminating and challenging. But it should be stressed that there are no steadfast prerequisites for moving forward. Readers should feel free to start reading from any part they prefer, as each chapter develops its own coherent argument. Limitations of space, within the scope of this introduction, do not allow us to do justice to all our contributors by presenting in detail, one by one, their fascinating arguments. There are, after all, 46 chapters in this *Research Handbook*. We hope that the above outline is instructive and appetizing enough for the reader.

IS THAT ALL?

Obviously, and despite our best efforts, we have not covered everything. This would be impossible for a single volume, even of the size of the one you are holding in your hands (or reading through a screen). Important scholars are missing from our list of authors, sometimes because they could not fit contributing a chapter within their writing schedule or because their work did not easily fit into our contingent (and, ultimately, partial) vision for this *Research Handbook*. However, we consider this a fair, comprehensive and representative treatment of the now vast and constantly expanding field of populism research and its contemporary, dynamic impetus.

However, there is one theme that is often recurring in relevant publications that we consciously chose to avoid. This is often framed as the ‘how to deal with...’, ‘what to do with...’ or ‘how to respond to...’ populism question. In some of the relevant publications, authors feel obliged to include such a section on how to deal with or contain populism, in which they search for remedies and advance strategies to minimize the (presumably wholly negative?) impact of the phenomenon. Obviously, the main problem here is that engaging with such a problematic may betray a certain bias of sorts:

How should we respond to populism? In recent years, a cottage industry of texts has emerged that seek to answer this question, with political theorists, political scientists and pundits alike putting forward potential ‘solutions’ to the supposed ‘problem’ of populism. Yet underlying many of these initiatives – consciously or not – is a conflation between populism and extremism, or populism and authoritarianism. (Malkopoulou and Moffitt 2023)

Hence, although such sections would rightly deserve a place within a medical handbook or another type of publication in pathology, virology, etc., they seem to, more or less, contradict the ethos of inquiry and the rigour required for a social-scientific publication alert to the need to engage with alterity, heterogeneity and the uncharted territories our ongoing political experience generates, with the openness called for a truly reflexive understanding of our political predicament. This does not mean that it is of no importance to engage with such issues when what is at stake is aspects of the phenomenon that deserve such a strategy to defend democratic culture (a requirement of free scientific inquiry in itself); however, this should not be done at the cost of accepting one-sided definitions, unreflexive assessments, ahistorical generalizations or patent misclassifications (as is often the case).

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

To conclude, this *Research Handbook* does not pretend to offer a definitive culmination marking some sort of closure within populism research. Exactly the opposite! Our hope is that it will inspire new and mature scholars, doctoral researchers, postgraduate and even undergraduate students, to chart new revealing avenues of research, endowing them with an expanded background knowledge, a rigorous conceptual reflexivity, a robust theoretical grounding, an enhanced historical and critical awareness and an easier access to a diverse methodological toolkit able – if not necessary – to generate further research of the highest order. It hosts some of the most challenging contributions by their peers on a variety of – often ignored – levels of argumentation; but the expectation is that the readers will surpass all of us in their own forthcoming research and reflections.

Taken together, the chapters comprising this volume could also serve as a call for consolidating greater pluralism within the field. But this is relevant at a much broader level as well. It may encourage a deeper democratic sensibility, which is sometimes missing in public debates on this complex issue. At a time when democracy is suffering in many parts of our world, we view this axis as thoroughly central, perhaps as the most important contribution, of this *Research Handbook*.

NOTES

1. See www.populismus.gr/about-populismus/.
2. Of course, a more alert and extensive historical sensibility would reveal that from the end of the nineteenth century, with the emergence of Russian and especially American populism, when the category entered the modern political vocabulary and the social-scientific grammar and onwards, there have been recurring cycles of populist mobilizations and corresponding interest from historical and socio-political inquiry.
3. For a critical perspective on this, see De Cleen and Glynos (2021).
4. See, for example, the Populism Specialist Group that has quickly established itself as one of the fastest growing and most active such groups in the British Political Studies Association, www.psa.ac.uk/specialist-groups/populism.
5. Obviously, many disagreements still remain on additional criteria to be used, on the different sensibilities enacted at the epistemological and theoretico-political level, on the assessment of particular cases, etc. This should not be seen as a weakness, rather as a sign of increasing vibrancy and maturity within the field.
6. In this context, the concept of ‘sensibility’ is very much stressed by Richard Parker (1994).

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PART I

CONCEPTS

1. Populism, democracy and ‘the people’

Geneviève Nootens

INTRODUCTION

The issue of the relationship between populism and democracy runs through contemporary debates about populism. Is populism basically democratic, but at odds with liberal democracy? Is populism one of the two strands making liberal democracy a paradoxical combination of a democratic pillar defined by the majoritarian logic and a liberal one grounded in a universalistic logic (Mouffe 2000)? Is populism an extraordinary departure from modern constitutionalism or, rather, ‘a product of and response to a series of stress factors that are intrinsic to the modern constitutional condition’ (Walker 2019: 519)? Is populism a threat to democracy, as populists would conceive of the people as a homogeneous community, promote an anti-pluralist type of polity and tend to delegitimize their opponents (Rummens 2017)? Or does populism point to a dimension inherent in all politics (Kim 2021) – and hence embody the essence of ‘post-foundational’ politics (Thomassen 2022)?

Although both ideational and discursive approaches contribute to understanding specific features of populism, they also both propose too broad a definition of populism: discursive approaches tend to make populism a proxy to democracy; ideational ones identify populism with features that actually are characteristic of many types of political discourses (such as the delegitimization of opponents, opposition to elites and the moralization of some claims). Both of these moves have a significant impact on our capacity to analyse the populism/democracy relationship. Ideational approaches risk discrediting challenges to the liberal institutional order in the name of ‘the people’ ‘as irrational and outside the boundaries of “normal” politics’ (Kim 2021: 5); this points to the difficulty of liberal democracy to think of challenges to the liberal order as being democratic. Discursive approaches, for their part, seem hesitant as to the status of pluralism as a condition of democracy. For example, when Giorgos Katsambekis (2022) discusses ‘exclusive’ and ‘progressive’ brands of populism, the issue seems to ultimately turn upon pluralism. But that leaves us with two options: either pluralism is core to democracy, and therefore right-wing (‘exclusive’) populisms are not democratic; or pluralism is not core to democracy, and ‘exclusive’ populisms are democratic. Scholars from the discursive approach actually sometimes seem to imply that the vindication of mass politics necessarily goes along with a critique of liberal pluralism.¹ They face a similar issue when discussing antagonism as a specific feature of populism: they seem to imply that left populisms (contrary to right populisms) transform antagonism into agonism; but then, once again, this leads one to conclude that either populism cannot be described, *sui generis*, as democratic (assuming that a description of adversaries/opponents as ‘enemies’ does not belong with democracy) or, alternatively, that left and right populisms do not belong with the same category of political phenomena. Let me stress that such difficulties seem to be entwined with the issue of the status of some ‘left’ movements that fit poorly with the characterization provided by approaches focusing their definitions of populism on homogeneity and moralization (see e.g. Katsambekis 2022: 60), but are nonetheless considered as belonging to a more general category that includes right-wing

populisms as well, since the latter also focus on ‘the people’, on some antagonistic relationship between the latter and the ‘elite’ or ‘establishment’ and on claims that representation is malfunctioning.²

These problems stand out when discussing the issue of the status of populism as a specific way to articulate political claims, as well as the issue of the ‘contents’ of ‘the people’. Scholars basically disagree on two main points: (1) the one of whether populism should be understood as an ideology or as a peculiar type of discourse; and (2) the one of the particular contents of ‘the people’, its relation to other actors and the terms in which its relationship with its opponents is signified (Katsambekis 2022: 53). Clarifying these disagreements requires that we look at the issue of who are ‘the people’ of modern democracy. The indeterminacy of ‘the people’ is of course core to it. But we also need to make sense of the complicated relationship between extra-institutional mobilizations and the key notion of constituent power: although the indeterminacy of ‘the people’ allows for different representations of the ‘contents’ of ‘the people’, the conceptual and normative apparatus of modern constitutionalism frames the notion of constituent power in very specific ways – ways that makes the conversion of ‘the multitude’ into ‘the people’ basic to the generation of political power. Hence, although democratic politics also happens ‘at the gates’ (to borrow Sidney Tarrow’s (2012) words) – namely, at the boundaries between institutionalized and non-institutionalized forms of participation – it nonetheless is framed by a peculiar view of the constituent power of the people. I conclude by stressing the paradoxical result of a retrieval of the term ‘populism’ that ended up classifying democratic and non-democratic movements in a similar category, in an attempt either to enhance the significance of contentious politics for democratization processes or to address such attempts with outright denial, fearing that they may challenge the liberal order.

IS POPULISM AN IDEOLOGY, OR A SPECIFIC TYPE OF DISCOURSE?

Scholars generally agree on two key features of populism as a way to frame politics: the central place of ‘the people’ as an agent and source of democratic legitimacy (as the privileged subject of politics) (see Katsambekis 2022; Mudde 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017; Stanley 2008); and an antagonistic worldview that pits ‘the people’ against an elite or establishment (see Katsambekis 2022: 53; Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 5–6; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2018). However, ideational approaches make it an ideology, whereas discursive ones make it a specific type of discourse. The former conceptualize populism as ‘a distinct ideology in that it conveys a particular way of construing the political in the specific interaction of its core concepts’ (Stanley 2008: 95). From this point of view, the antagonism ‘the people’/‘the elite’ ‘forms a key element of a distinct interpretation of the political’ (Stanley 2008: 95). It is, though, a ‘thin-centred’ ideology, because it exhibits a narrow range of political concepts (Mudde 2004: 544; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 5–6) and cannot ‘stand alone as a practical political ideology: it lacks the capacity to put forward a wide-ranging and coherent program for the solution to crucial political questions’ (Stanley 2008: 95). Hence, it is combined with other ideologies, such as nationalism, ecologism or socialism (Mudde 2004: 544).

Discursive approaches rather argue that populism is not an issue of definite content, but rather of how these contents are articulated through a specific logic – the one of the antago-

nistic frontier 'the people'/'the elite', the linking of popular demands and the representation of 'the people' (the democratic sovereign) as marginalized (Katsambekis 2022: 59, 61; Stavrakakis and Jäger 2018). Such a logic 'can be employed with varying frequency, intensity and consistency by political actors' (Katsambekis 2022: 59).

The discursive approach is held by its tenants to avoid a priori assumptions 'about the specific contents and the ideological or programmatic features of populist actors' (Katsambekis 2022: 62). From this point of view, the difference between right and left 'populisms' turns upon the meaning attributed to the antagonistic divide. Populism is progressive if 'the people' is constructed as an open, pluralist and inclusive subject; we rather have a case of exclusivist and radical right populism if 'the people' is represented as an exclusive collective subject opposed both to the 'establishment' and to alien 'others' (Katsambekis 2022: 62). Hence, the particular 'contents' of 'the people' – how the latter is constructed and the antagonistic divide conceived of – is critical.

THE PARTICULAR CONTENTS OF 'THE PEOPLE'

Ideational and discursive approaches both point to the significance of allowing for the construction of 'the people' as an open and contingent process (see Kim 2021: 10; Thomassen 2022). This is not really surprising, as 'the people' of modern democracy is commonly held to be indeterminate. Approaches disagree, though, on whether populism allows for such an open process. Ideational approaches argue that the populists' conception of 'the people' does not allow 'for thinking popular sovereignty as a dynamic and open-ended process' (Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 491; Rummens 2017: 554): from this point of view, populism conveys a monolithic and homogeneous account of 'who the people are' (Mudde 2017: 30; Katsambekis 2022: 58), at odds with pluralism. As said earlier, from the point of view of discursive approaches, populism is not an issue of specific contents, but rather a peculiar type of discourse. The ways in which 'the people' is constructed and the meaning attributed to the antagonistic divide 'the people'/'the elite' are to be left open. A populist movement, leader or party can well be compatible with liberal democracy. This allows for a more accurate representation of the empirical field both of populist and democratic politics (Katsambekis 2022: 62).

Ideational approaches take populism to combine two core features, as to the 'contents' of 'the people'. First, they hold this key distinction to be somehow related to 'morality': populism opposes the 'pure' people to the 'corrupt' elite (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 11). Second, they take populism to convey a monolithic and homogeneous account of 'who the people are' (Mudde 2017: 30; Rummens 2017: 554). According to them, populists tend to argue that there is some fixed, unified will of the people (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017: 491), to lean toward 'extreme majoritarianism' (Urbinati 2017: 572) and to oppose social and political pluralism (Urbinati 1998: 110). Let us go back briefly to these two features (morality and homogeneity).

Mudde argues that populism is moralistic (rather than programmatic) because essential to its discourse is a 'normative' distinction between the people as 'pure' and the elite as 'corrupt', rather than empirical differences in behaviour or attitudes (Mudde 2004: 544). He concludes that 'Populism presents a Manichean outlook in which there are only friends and foes' (Mudde 2004: 544): populists criticize the political establishment as well as economic, cultural and

media elites; these elites are portrayed ‘as one homogeneous *corrupt* group that works against the “general will” of the people’ (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 11–12). Populism, then, is ‘moralistic’ because it opposes a ‘morally pure and unified people’ to corrupt (hence morally inferior) elites (Kim 2021: 5ff; Stavrakakis and Jäger 2018: 549). More precisely, moralization ‘refers to the supposed tendency of populism to simplify political antagonism: to idealize its own camp, which it describes in terms of purity and homogeneity, and to vilify the enemy camp, that of the establishment, which is then denounced as corrupted and evil’ (Stavrakakis and Jäger 2018: 559). Criteria such as power, nationalism and ethnicity are secondary from this point of view. Let me stress that one can agree that core to populism is ‘the people’ in moral battle against ‘the elite’, and yet argue that homogeneity and antagonism to out-groups are a non-core characteristic of populism – and hence conclude that ‘The core elements of populism are not anti-democratic’ (Mansbridge and Macedo 2019: 70). However, one could also (reasonably enough) argue that the moralization of the antagonism (if verified) necessarily entails such characteristics, so that at the end of the day the distinction between core and non-core characteristics actually is blurred. Amongst other things, the moralization of the antagonism may entail the claim that ‘the people’ cannot be wrong – an assertion that runs against fallibility and grounds a tendency to delegitimize opponents. Stefan Rummens (2017: 52) argues that such a delegitimization, although generally underappreciated, is key to understanding the authoritarian tendencies of populism. This claim, though, is a bit vague, as the delegitimization of opponents is not specific to populism. One could refine it by specifying that they do so on the ground of the claim that they speak for the ‘true’ people, and focus on their opponents themselves rather than on the latter’s preferences.

Discursive approaches have stressed that the moralization thesis faces several issues. First, moralization is not specific to populism: ‘all political discourse is shot through with moral claims’ (Stavrakakis and Jäger 2018: 560; also Katsambekis 2019; Kim 2021). Hence, ‘the inclusion of morality as a defining criterion for populism seems to obscure the specificity and distinctiveness of the phenomenon’ (Katsambekis 2022: 60). The divide ‘the people’/‘the elite’ (establishment) is more often a *political* one, ‘premised on advancing ideologico-political readings of social divisions or the representation of contrasting social and economic interests’ (Katsambekis 2022: 54). The assumption of such a ‘predominantly moral view’ (Katsambekis 2022: 58) is not really helpful in understanding populism: it does not tell much about specific modes of construction and representation of the people, nor about how to assess its antagonistic relationship to its ‘Other’ (Katsambekis 2022: 68); and it ‘seems ultimately inadequate to function as the central criterion for the differential identification of populism’ (Stavrakakis and Jäger 2018: 547–548, 549). In other words, the operability of the minimal definition is undermined (Katsambekis 2022: 60).

Second, the moralization thesis may disclose a hermeneutics of a ‘morally charged anti-populism’ (Kim 2021: 5) that actually serves to discredit ‘challenges to the established order in the name of “the people” as irrational and outside the boundaries of “normal” politics’ (Kim 2021: 5), as well as to stabilize the hegemony of the approach defining populism as a pathology (Kim 2021: 5).

Third, Yannis Stavrakakis and Anton Jäger (2018: 558–559) suggest that the moralization thesis betrays substantive continuities with a (discredited) Cold War pluralism inspired by elitism, as it bears striking resemblances with the stereotypical treatments of populism first offered in the pluralist canon (Jäger 2017).

Finally, discursive approaches agree that the construction of 'the people' in populist discourse builds upon a polarizing logic ('us versus them') but they argue that such a logic points to a sense of unity rather than homogeneity (Katsambekis 2022: 53–54). According to discursive scholars, however, populists construct 'the people' in different (plural and heterogeneous) ways (Katsambekis 2022: 54); the (ideational) assumption that populism constructs a homogeneous and morally pure people is problematic because it necessarily equates populism with anti-pluralism and illiberalism (Katsambekis 2022: 53).

These clarifications still leave us with three significant issues, though, if we are to bring the analysis of the populism/democracy relationship on more solid grounds. A first issue relates to the assumption of a continuity between ideational approaches and Cold War pluralism. One needs to investigate whether ideational approaches actually ground their critique of populism in the type of pluralism that was core to the revisionists' work of the 1950s and 1960s – and if a vindication of mass politics necessarily goes along with a critique of liberal pluralism as including the respect for a diversity of opinions and freedom of conscience. For example, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser make pluralism a non-dualistic perspective opposed to both elitism and populism (2017: 7–8). True, they stress that pluralism allows for the division of society 'into a broad variety of partly overlapping social groups with different ideas and interests' (2017: 14), and that pluralists stress the significance for a society of having many centres of power (2017: 14). It is worthwhile remembering, though, that liberal pluralism cannot be reduced simply to such assumptions, and (as well) that there are other pluralist traditions, such as English pluralism, constitutional pluralism or (in philosophical debates) a conception of pluralism as a way to escape some problematic dichotomies, such as the monism/externalism one.

A second issue relates to the (implicit) distinction, in discursive approaches, between forms of populism. Most scholars working from the discursive perspective distinguish between inclusive and exclusive forms of populism.³ Such a distinction actually seems to turn upon whether a specific populist discourse subscribes to pluralism. For example, Katsambekis stresses that if 'the people' is represented as an exclusive collective subject, united through reference to a common ethnic origin, language, etc., and opposed to both an establishment and alien 'others' (e.g. immigrants, religious minorities, etc.), then we have a case of exclusive, radical-right populism. But we have cases of a progressive brand of populism that makes the people 'an open, inclusive and pluralist subject, confronting an unresponsive and repressive elite' – cases in which populism embraces and protects minorities, thus contributing to a more tolerant view of society (Katsambekis 2022: 62). This leaves us with two options: either pluralism is core to democracy, and therefore right-wing ('exclusive') populisms are not democratic; or pluralism is to be considered a non-core characteristic of democracy, so that right-wing, exclusive populisms are to be considered democratic on the ground of their core reference to 'the people'. In the former case, ideational approaches may have more purchase than acknowledged by discursive ones; and one may suspect some inconsistency in discursive approaches, as they very often take populism to be a sub-species of democratic politics (see e.g. Katsambekis 2022: 62). In the latter case, let me stress that the core reference to 'the people', just as the one to 'popular sovereignty', has had widely different meanings in Western history (Nootens 2013); in order to be coherent with political modernity widely understood, it must take a very characteristic form. In other words, there is nothing inherently democratic in the general idea of popular sovereignty; it took a democratic turn in very specific circumstances – ones in which 'the people' as a body politics is both endowed with collective political agency

and seen as composed of autonomous and equal individuals who are to rule for themselves (the two dimensions are closely related), with a clear connection between popular sovereignty and the rights of representative institutions.

A related issue is that of the status of antagonism, which features as a trait of populism in both types of approaches. For example, Katsambekis argues that populism is a way of doing politics that is identifiable by a specific logic of articulation of actual contents, a logic in which the reference to the people ‘is formulated within an antagonistic view of society’ (Katsambekis 2022: 61): there is a basic, core division within society between an ‘us’ (‘the people’) and a ‘them’ (the elites), and ‘the people’ identify through their opposition to such ‘opponents’ (Katsambekis 2022: 62). This logic refers to three basic points: an internal antagonistic frontier between ‘the people’ and power; the linking of demands left unsatisfied by ‘unresponsive’ elites; and ‘the representation of “the people”... as marginalized and underprivileged *plebs* that claims to be the legitimate community of the people, the democratic sovereign’ (Katsambekis 2022: 61). Let me stress that some scholars from the discursive approach attempt to retrieve ‘left’ populisms from the problems related with an antagonistic view of politics that would support the argument that populism actually offers a representation of society as divided between friends and foes (see e.g. Thomassen 2022). But if such a redescription is core to democracy, and if right-wing populisms do not proceed with it, then one must (once again) conclude that right-wing populisms are not democratic. That implies, in turn, either that populism cannot be described as being – *sui generis* – democratic, or that left- and right-wing populisms do not belong to the same species.⁴ At a minimum, this would mean that the distinction between left- and right-wing ‘populisms’ does not merely rely on different ways of signifying antagonism.

DEMOCRACY, POPULISM AND ‘THE PEOPLE’

These issues are significant because populism is generally portrayed as being somehow at odds – or to fit uneasily – with liberal democracy. On the one hand, ideational approaches held populism to challenge pluralism and promote homogeneity, so that populism runs contrary to (liberal) democracy; on the other, discursive perspectives focus on a democratic dimension of populism as a critique of institutions (including current representation) and of the elitist lineage of liberal democracy, so that it is liberal democracy that is held not to be really democratic (or not enough).

It is of course empirically and theoretically sound to distinguish liberalism and democracy.⁵ Liberal states were slowly democratized from the eighteenth century on, thanks amongst other things to contentious politics. Such a democratization gave rise to a specific form of democracy. However, one may wonder whether this process supports the ‘two-strand theory’ of democracy – the idea that democracy as we know it is ‘a complex hybrid within which two essentially incompatible strands coexist’ (Canovan 2005: 83; see also Mouffe 2000; Rummens 2017). This theory actually ‘exaggerates the opposition between liberal constitutionalism and the cause of “the people”’ (Canovan 2005: 67). It runs contrary to a sound analysis of the actual relationship between popular sovereignty and modern constitutionalism. Let us recall, for example, the Huguenots’ significant contribution to the elaboration of early modern constitutionalism (see Skinner 1978), as well as the Levellers’ claims (see Canovan 2005). As Canovan puts it, ‘Defence of individual rights and due process of law against arbitrary rule by

the powerful was historically one of the main elements of the people's cause' (Canovan 2005: 88).

But who, then, are 'the people' of modern democracy? As noted above, the indeterminacy of 'the people' is core to the latter. The problem raised by such indeterminacy is sometimes framed as the 'boundary problem', namely, the acknowledgement that 'it is impossible to define democratically who precisely the people are' (Ochoa Espejo 2017: 610; see also Nootens 2009; Whelan 1983).⁶ Core to the boundary problem is the idea that democratic theory faces a dilemma when attempting to identify 'who are the people who can and should govern themselves democratically' (Ochoa Espejo 2015: 60, 2017: 610). This problem is said to make democratic legitimacy incoherent because it raises the issue of upholding the latter's justificatory grounds.

Answers to this issue include procedural views, views equating 'the people' with extra-institutional mobilizations⁷ and views aiming at constructing 'the people' as at once unbound and self-limiting. All of them face significant issues, though. For example, procedural views do not take sufficiently into account the specificity and contingency of norm-generating processes; yet, to understand what democracy is about, we need a sense both of its core meaning and of the processes by which contention drives democratization (and de-democratization). Views equating 'the people' with extra-institutional mobilizations focus on such processes, but they face at least two significant problems. First, our judgement of political movements that claim to speak for the people cannot be detached from the justice or injustice of the cause they pursue (Ochoa Espejo 2017: 614). Second, these views are based on a significant conceptual mistake: if, as is sometimes claimed, they equate 'the people' with extra-institutional mobilizations of 'the multitude', then one may conclude that they overlook the fact that representation is basic to the generation of political power. Moreover, such views hardly allow 'for a systematic understanding of how claims translate into lasting transformations of the political' (Nootens 2022: 34), and underestimate the significance of a legalistic understanding of constituent power in ensuring the subjection of those entrusted with rule-making to those who are ruled, 'by mean of a political constitution' (Niesen 2019: 9). Finally, the view of the people as at once unbound and self-limiting (as proposed by Ochoa Espejo)⁸ makes self-limitation core to the distinction between populism and democracy, but it likely makes a conceptual mistake close to that conveyed by those understanding 'the people' as 'the multitude', as it assumes 'the people' to be prior both to law and the state (see Ochoa Espejo 2017: 609).

Clarifying this issue of the indeterminacy of 'the people' requires that we turn to the notion of constituent power, because it is this very notion that allows to make sense of the idea of 'the people' as a collective agent whose sovereign will legitimizes a regime. In modern constitutionalism, it is the notion of constituent power that embodies the collective political agency of the persons who belong with a polity and the idea that they are to be the source of the arrangements peculiar to a specific regime (Nootens 2015: 137). Constituent power allows for the conceptualization of the people as both a virtual unity and a non-institutionalized entity established in relation to constituted authority (Loughlin 2014: 33); it is a concept of representation that converts the multitude into a form of political agency (Loughlin 2014: 228; see also Loughlin and Walker 2007: 3). And it is precisely this conversion that generates political power, because such a generation is possible 'only when "the people" is differentiated from the existential reality of a mass of particular people (the multitude)'; therefore, the constituent power of 'the people' is not the actual material power of a multitude (Loughlin 2014:

228). Moreover, constituent power is unformed and unbounded unless framed by the state; the concept of ‘the people’ as a collective political actor actually takes life in the foundation of the sovereign state (Tierney 2008: 17). In other words, it depends upon the idea that public power – namely, political power harnessed through the institutionalization of authority – acquires autonomous status with the establishment of the modern state (Loughlin 2003: 78): the unified will of ‘the people’ is to be found in the political existence of the state (Loughlin 2014), and competing representations of ‘the people’ are more basically framed by the existence of the state as the core condition for constituent power. Neither ‘the people’ nor the constitution create the state; and constituent power is not prior to law, it rather mediates between democracy and law (Loughlin 2003, 2014). One cannot apprehend the depth of the conceptual field of the modern democratic reference to ‘the people’ if one does not also understand that constituent power acts as such an interface. But then, both a decisionism that takes constitution founding to be a political undertaking and a normativism that takes constituent power to be entirely absorbed into constituted power may be argued to be flawed.⁹

CONCLUSION

Scholarship on populism looms between attempts to stress the legitimacy of democratic movements that tend to be relegated to the outside of ‘normal’ politics, on the one hand, and concerns with a specific way of framing politics that may sustain antagonism, polarization and exclusiveness, on the other. Clarifying the issue mainly turns upon clarifying both what democracy is about and the ideological status of populism.

To understand what democracy is about, we need a sense both of its core meaning and of the processes by which contention drives democratization. As to the former, Josiah Ober argues that the original meaning of democracy refers to power ‘in the sense of “capacity to do things”’ (Ober 2008: 3), rather than to majority rule. *Demokratia* means ‘the empowered demos’, ‘the regime in which the demos gains a collective capacity to effect change in the public realm’ (Ober 2008: 7). As to the latter, for the sake of brevity, let me only refer to the conception of democratization worked out by Doug McAdam and his colleagues (2001). Democratization points to ‘any net shift toward citizenship, breadth of citizenship, equality of citizenship, binding consultation, and protection’ (McAdam et al. 2001: 266). For example, the increasing insulation of existing categorical inequalities from public politics, as well as the dissolution of coercive controls supporting relations of exploitation, contributes to democratization (McAdam et al. 2001: 275). Contention drives democratization when its processes bring us closer to the citizenship zone – the zone of broad, equal and protected consultation. When it does not, it either blocks democratization or leads to de-democratization. Note that this definition applies to all those who are subject to the authority of a government; hence, it allows for the inclusion of claims located ‘at the gates’ of ‘normal’ politics. Although the results of contention are most often unpredictable and unintended, this approach nonetheless provides us with landmarks helping to assess claims, programmes and types of discourses.

The ideological status of populism also raises issues. I have stressed that the representation of ‘the people’ as an open and contingent process is not specific enough to contradistinguish populism from other ideologies or discourses, since it is characteristic of modern democracy. Hence, we need to be more specific about the conditions under which ‘people-centrism’ is to be considered peculiar to populism. Neither are contentious processes opposing ‘the people’

to those in power specific enough; such processes run through the long history of popular sovereignty in the West (see Nootens 2013). A focus on antagonism as a way to frame the polity itself (rather than politics) may be the more specific trait of the opposition 'the people'/'the elite' as framed by populisms; the antagonistic identification of 'the people' through such a frame may be read as challenging the democratic polity as a horizontal community of equals. But here again, things are more complicated than they seem at first sight; scholars from the discursive approach sometimes imply that left populisms are democratic on the ground that they redescribe antagonism as agonism.

To be fair, one has to acknowledge that many of the basic issues raised here actually point to some problems in the very way political modernity has been framed. For example, the autonomy of the political (embodied by state sovereignty) does not necessarily imply the democratization of such polities; and, actually, dominant political theory subordinates popular sovereignty to state sovereignty. Although the transformation of 'the multitude' into 'the people' generates the power relationship, it does not imply that political authority is vested in 'the people'; on the contrary, political authority rests with the state.¹⁰ The problem, then, is that any ideology or discourse that contributes to de-democratize public politics also reinforces this domination.

Finally, one may wonder whether the attempt to legitimize democratic movements from the left and to assert the democratic character of some of the movements/claims that challenge the current institutional order of liberal democracy has not led to a paradoxical result: the retrieval of an earlier, primary meaning of the word 'populism' in order to relegitimize it, while it actually has gone through a semantic drift (Jäger 2017) that may have significantly transformed it, resulting in a (puzzling?) categorization of movements/parties such as SYRIZA and Podemos along with, for example, the Rassemblement National. Jäger's analysis of this semantic drift, of its roots in a very specific form of pluralism¹¹ and of its reappropriation by some European scholars¹² sheds light on the mismatch between 'populist' movements of the nineteenth century and right-wing populisms of the twentieth. From such a perspective, it is basically the reappropriation and correlative relabelling by the far right that explains that right and left populisms are now considered as belonging to the same (discursive or ideological) category. If this is the case, then one can argue that populism has all along been radical-democratic (and hence an accurate label for certain 'progressive' movements); and that far-right movements have unduly appropriated the label for themselves.¹³ Whatever the answer, though, one may still raise the issue of whether it is fair to use the same label (based either on an ideological or discursive analysis) to describe exclusivist movements, on the one hand, and movements that strive for broad, equal and protected citizenship, on the other. For once the central challenges related to the analysis of populism are clarified, the issue of broad, equal and protected citizenship certainly still remains the core political one.

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NOTES

1. They face a similar issue when discussing antagonism as a specific feature of populism: they seem to imply that left populisms (contrary to right populisms) transform antagonism into agonism; but then, once again, this leads to conclude that either populism cannot be described, *sui generis*, as democratic (assuming that a description of adversaries/opponents as ‘enemies’ does not belong with democracy) or, alternatively, that left and right populisms do not belong with the same category of political phenomena.
2. At first sight, though, one may wonder why such left movements are not simply described as democratic or, maybe, *populaires*.
3. The editors of this *Research Handbook* have correctly pointed out to me that this distinction emerged in such terms in some ideational approaches, and that although it has been used by many discursive scholars, the latter use it as part of an understanding of the construction of ‘the people’ in populism as a contingent process that can lead either to pluralistic or to homogenizing configurations. From my point of view, though, this does not solve the issue of the status of pluralism – and hence, of the relationship between populism and democracy.
4. Katsambekis argues that ‘if one fully adopts the homogeneity/anti-pluralist thesis as a core defining element of populism, we end up excluding most populist actors at the left of the political spectrum; actors that ideational scholars too identify as “populist”’ (Katsambekis 2022: 60) (e.g. SYRIZA, Podemos or Bernie Sanders). However, one could as well conclude that SYRIZA, Podemos or Sanders are not populist but are rather social-democrats.
5. Stavrakakis and Jäger (2018: 553) acknowledge that Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser understand the differences between the liberal and democratic traditions, and that they make democracy a combination of popular sovereignty and majority rule; hence, democracy ‘can be direct or indirect, liberal or illiberal’ (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 80).
6. Of course, such indeterminacy is considerably narrowed by two building blocks of political modernity: the state and the nation (see Canovan 1998; Nootens 2006, 2013; Tamir 1993). I focus here on how the boundary problem usually is framed in political theory.
7. Ochoa Espejo ascribes such a view to Laclau. But according to Thomassen (2019), representation is crucial for Laclau, and his theory does not exclude institutionalist politics. I wish to thank G. Katsambekis for this clarification. Let me stress that according to Kim, Laclau’s theorization of populism makes the latter a logic inherent in all politics, but there is also in Laclau’s work a tendency ‘to (over)-emphasize the emancipatory effects of populism as a politics of the underdog’ (Kim 2021: 8) – namely, a bias towards the democratic potentialities of populism. However, according to Kim, there also are ‘clear tensions between populism and radical democracy in [Laclau’s] work’ (Kim 2021: 8).
8. From her point of view, populists run against the criteria of self-limitation as they are said to tend to adopt the view that ‘the people’ is always right, complete and absolute (Ochoa Espejo 2017). Democrats rather tend to depict ‘the people’ as a framework that guarantees pluralism, ‘and thus they also frame any particular cause as fallible, including their own’ (Ochoa Espejo 2017: 623).
9. On the distinctions between normativism, decisionism and relationalism see Walker (2017) and Loughlin (2014).
10. This may actually be the most basic antagonistic frontier.
11. In the context of the (American) revisionist controversy of the 1950s and 1960s, populism (as opposed to pluralism as both a political creed and an epistemic model) was used to describe movements ‘that did not qualify for the parameters of interest-group politics’ (Jäger 2017: 317). It was transfigured ‘from a historiographical reference to a polemical concept’ (Jäger 2017: 317).
12. According to Jäger, it is P.-A. Taguieff’s work that grounded the construction of ‘a wholly new apparatus to explain the rise of “populism” in Europe’ (Jäger 2017: 318). Taguieff was the first to classify the (then) rising Front National as ‘national-populist’ and many scholars embraced this classification. This made the ‘ascriptional’ qualities of the term seem straightforward, but it has also had a ‘looping effect’ as Frontists, rather than disavowing the classification, ‘themselves now decided to wear it as a token of honour’ (Jäger 2017: 318). The term became increasingly used indiscriminately, for example to classify as ‘populist’ ‘every politician... who dared to utter demands for participation’ (Jäger 2017: 318), in quite direct a lineage with the revisionists’ account.
13. I wish to thank the editors for this clarification.

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2. The populism–nationalism nexus

Michaelangelo Anastasiou and Jacopo Custodi

INTRODUCTION

Anyone who stays updated with Western political developments can easily notice that actors who are labelled as ‘populists’ are often somewhat nationalist too. Does it then follow that populism and nationalism are equivalent? After all, scholarly work on European politics has often conflated the two concepts, treating populism as a far-right nationalist phenomenon, or as a ‘kind of nationalism’ (Stewart 1969: 183). Yet, in recent years, a growing body of literature challenges this assumption, by conceptualizing populism and nationalism as analytically distinct phenomena, much as they can overlap and/or interconnect in concrete politics (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017).

We begin this chapter by engaging with this academic debate, looking at the notion of nationalism and its implications for studies of populism. We argue that the ambiguities and nuances of the populism/nationalism nexus cannot be fully illuminated by focusing solely on contemporary populism studies, as this nexus harks back to the long-standing historical identification of ‘the people’ with ‘the nation’. This is further discussed by examining how specific meanings, practices and modes of identification came to be associated with ‘the people’ and ‘the nation’, becoming integral components of contemporary societies. While such components tend to be relatively stable, they are nonetheless not immune to change: ‘people’ and ‘nation’ both refer to ideas of a community whose boundaries are politically contested. The people and the nation can thus be redefined according to new ideological contents and serve different political purposes.

NATIONALISM IN POPULISM STUDIES

The notion of nationalism occupies an ambiguous position in studies of populism, wherein one can discern two general analytical tendencies. The first either conflates nationalism and populism, or treats them as identical phenomena. The second understands nationalism and populism as analytically distinct phenomena, that may nonetheless interact with one another in a variety of ways in the empirical world. As we will see, this difference can be attributed to theoretical as well as to empirical factors, while each approach leads not only to different understandings of nationalism and populism, but to different political considerations as well.

Examinations of the relationship between nationalism and populism have become increasingly prevalent in recent years owing to the political success of the populist far right in Europe and the United States. This development is conventionally framed, in both journalistic and academic discourse, as the ‘re-emergence’ of nationalist-populist politics, where the notions of nationalism and populism are used interchangeably (Inglehart and Norris 2016). In populism studies specifically, the conflation of populism and nationalism is historically entrenched. This is because early and highly influential studies of populism, which have defined the course of

the discipline, have established a close theoretical association between the two concepts/phenomena (Germani 1978; Ionescu and Gellner 1969). But there are empirical reasons as well. It seems that the most prominent populist parties in Europe, including some that are becoming increasingly influential, are of a far-right and nationalist orientation. Examples include the National Front in France (recently rebranded as National Rally), the UK Independence Party, Alternative for Germany as well as Fidesz in Hungary. Empirical studies of populism have, by extension, predominantly focused on the far right (e.g. Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Betz 1994), reinforcing the impression that populism is a ‘nationalist phenomenon’ located at the far right of the political–ideological spectrum. It therefore comes as no surprise that nationalism is very often highlighted as a key element of populism (e.g. Angell 1966: 316; Halikiopoulou et al. 2012; Jansen 2011: 82; Lukacs 2005: 72; Oliver and Rahn 2016).

However, the question should be posed as to whether the empirical association between populism and nationalism rather reflects the far right’s successful deployment of populist rhetoric (Mondon 2017: 357). Critical enquiry also warrants historical awareness. As various studies have demonstrated, the close empirical association between populism and nationalism can be attributed to historical parameters, which are time- and place-specific. Thus, in the European context, the political salience of ‘the people’ grew alongside the consolidation of nations, where ‘the people’ came to be perceived as a particular (ethno-)national identity (Greenfeld 1996; Hobsbawm 2012). But this historical association between ‘the people’ and ‘the nation’ is neither automatic, nor universal. In fact, empirical evidence shows that populism and nationalism are not always positively correlated, while the association between the two is complex and nuanced. Latin American populism, for instance, while not devoid of nationalist rhetoric, very often displays an inclusionary character, defined by the political, economic and symbolic inclusion of marginalized communities (de la Torre 2013; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Evo Morales’ policies, to cite a relevant example, established a legal basis for the provision of indigenous rights (Albro 2010: 78–79), while constitutionally defining Bolivia as a ‘plurinational’ state. One can also point to the example of Podemos who have repeatedly emphasized Spain’s cultural diversity, proclaiming it to be ‘plurinational’ as well as ‘a country of countries’ (Custodi 2021: 715). Finally, it is worth mentioning that there are examples of attempted transnational articulations of ‘the people’, as the case of Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 exemplifies (De Cleen et al. 2020).

These empirical examples cast doubt on the idea that populism is invariably and/or uniformly nationalist, at least in the rigid exclusionary sense of the term. But we should note that there are also theoretical reasons behind the conflation of nationalism and populism. Here, it is important to highlight that in studies of populism, nationalism has been principally examined with reference to the question of democracy. This spirals down to a key theoretical question in populism studies, namely, whether populism is, at heart, anti-democratic. Conventional understandings of populism, following entrenched theoretical inclinations, consider populism to be inherently undemocratic or illiberal (Mény and Surel 2002; Mounk 2018; Müller 2016; Pappas 2018; Taggart 2000; Urbinati 1998). This analytical bias is often affirmed or reinforced by citing, as empirical evidence, populist manifestations of an exclusionary nationalist orientation, which, at best, advance restrictive understandings of democracy (Aalberg et al. 2016; Inglehart and Norris 2016; Minkenberg 1992).

The associated methodological implications should be explicated. By aprioristically defining populism as undemocratic and/or nationalist, one excludes from the outset the possibility that populism may assume an inclusionary, non-nationalist or transnationalist form. These

conventions are increasingly contested, as an emerging body of literature is doubting the notion that populism is invariably nationalist (De Cleen et al. 2020; Moffitt 2017; Stavrakakis et al. 2017). This relates to broader developments within populism studies. Contrary to conventional approaches, which deem populism to be inherently undemocratic, more recent works have examined populism's democratic potential (Panizza 2005). To this end, certain theorists have established an explicit connection between populism and democracy. Margaret Canovan's (1999) most influential thesis, for example, sees populism as an epiphenomenal expression of democracy. Others have highlighted populism's ambiguity by noting that it can assume either a democratic or non-democratic form (Bonikowski et al. 2019; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013).

Consequently, one can observe significant efforts to theoretically disentangle populism from nationalism. This can be observed in various schools of thought, ranging from those associated with ideational (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013) and performative (Moffitt 2018), to formal-discursive understandings of populism (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). The influential contribution of Essex School scholars should be emphasized and epistemologically situated here. By steering away from substantive understandings of populism, which tend to operationalize populism on the basis of universal definitions, Essex School theorists understand populism as a political logic. Populism entails the symbolic simplification of the social field into two camps, 'the people' versus 'the establishment' (Laclau 2005: 83–93; Stavrakakis 2017: 527–528). 'The people' and 'the establishment' are understood as signifiers that are deployed in the context of a precise antagonistic political logic. 'The people' comes to symbolize the equivalence between diverse unfulfilled demands and, thus, identities (Laclau 2005: 73–83, 149). 'The establishment', conversely, comes to represent the very source of the grievance(s) underpinning the said demands (Laclau 2005: 77–93). The most substantive methodological advantage of Essex School approaches consists in their flexibility and therefore their theoretical and empirical applicability. Its formal understanding of populism enables it to account for a diversity of populist manifestations (Laclau 2005: 175–199; Stavrakakis et al. 2017), ranging from exclusive nationalist to radically democratic variants.

Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis (2017), for example, analytically distinguish populist from nationalist politics, by examining the 'discursive architectonics' of political configurations. Their approach is based on two key questions: Is a political configuration principally organized with reference to 'the people', along an internal axis (up/down) of antagonism separating 'the people' from 'the establishment'? Or is it principally organized with reference to 'the nation', along an external axis (in/out) of antagonism separating the national community from an excluded 'Other' (e.g. 'the immigrant')? De Cleen and Stavrakakis' contribution has invited novel empirical examinations of the populism/nationalism nexus (Custodi 2021; Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2017; Kim 2017; Miró 2021), related theoretical and epistemological investigations (Anastasiou 2019; Moffitt 2017), while also enabling cross-disciplinary debates, particularly between populism and nationalism studies (Anastasiou 2020; Brubaker 2020).

Rogers Brubaker's (2020) reply to De Cleen and Stavrakakis, in particular, has ignited a constructive and thought-provoking dialogue. Brubaker suggests that De Cleen and Stavrakakis' conceptual distinction between populism and nationalism cannot effectively capture populism's inherent ambiguity, as populism's and nationalism's antagonistic axes very often intersect. 'The people' may simultaneously invoke 'the plebs', 'the sovereign demos' and 'the nation', while 'the establishment' may be excluded as an internal communal element *and* as

an external element symbolically associated with nationalist forms of exclusion, such as ‘the foreign elite’, ‘the European Union’, ‘immigrants’, etc. (see also Caiani and Kröll 2017).

Indeed, the productive ambiguity of populism is being increasingly registered in the literature (Ostiguy et al. 2021; Panizza 2005), while various recent works have investigated how nationalist elements come to intersect with populism, even in cases of populist movements espousing non- and anti-nationalist positions (Anastasiou 2019; Custodi 2022; Eklundh 2018; Gerbaudo and Screti 2017). As De Cleen (2017: 348) suggests, ‘Populist actors too, and certainly populist parties, are usually organized on the level of the nation-state. So, when populists claim to represent the people-as-underdog... this people-as-underdog is usually, almost by default, defined on the level of the nation-state – whether these parties are nationalist or not’. Thus, it seems to be the case that nationalism, as either rhetoric or institutional framework, very often comes to overdetermine populist configurations (Anastasiou 2020).

This poses a most pertinent methodological question. Should the close empirical association between populism and nationalism be a priori incorporated as a feature of populism? This is the question that is at the heart of the debate between Brubaker and De Cleen and Stavrakakis. Brubaker’s method aprioristically operationalizes the intersections between populism and nationalism, generating a typology of possible interactions. De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2020), on the other hand, insist that nationalism and populism should be conceptually distinguished, while their complex interactions should be accounted for at the level of concrete politics and empirical analysis. The outstanding question, however, is *how* such interactions should be accounted for.

POPULAR AND NATIONAL IDENTITIES

We maintain that the productive ambiguities and nuances of the populism/nationalism nexus can be further illuminated by comprehensively examining their symbolic and socio-historical dimensions, as well as their role in fostering forms of identification. We proceed by taking, as an ‘operational’ starting point, the political centrality of the categories ‘the people’ and ‘the nation’, understood here as the key symbolic elements of populism and nationalism, respectively (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; Mudde 2004). These categories should be understood as symbolic fields through which political practice and forms of social organization are enabled.

The significance of ‘the people’, as a central element of modern politics, can be traced back to the political revolutions of modernity. We can paradigmatically cite, as key historical ‘events’, the French and American revolutions. Both were executed with abounding references to ‘the people’ and came to operate as ‘blueprints’ for later revolutions (Anderson 2006: 80–81). ‘The people’, as both an identity and meaningful cluster, was, and still is, principally related to the question of power (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017: 2–3). The emergence of popular sovereignty is located at the crossroads of two interrelated historical developments. The first is the dissolution of the Old Regime, alongside the gradual (though always partial) transference of power from the aristocracy to ‘the people’ (Hobsbawm 2012: 80–100). The second is the increasing state control of social life, enabling, as a response, the proliferating pursuit of democratic rights (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 149–171; Mann 2010, 2: 730–732; Hobsbawm 2012: 80–100). It is important to note that in both cases, ‘the people’ emerges as a ‘body’, whether symbolically or empirically, *in opposition to the centre(s) of power*. It

is our hypothesis that this characteristic of populist politics – the very *problematization* of power – consists in one of its diachronic features that emerges from the political *geist* of the Enlightenment. This continuity across time and space, we should emphasize, is not a substantive, in the strict sense of the term, feature of populism. It is, rather, the precise product of political acts that, on an ongoing basis, *reproduce the populist logic across time and space*. As we will see, such reproductive processes hinge on precise conditions of possibility that partially retain and partially alter the meaning and identity of ‘the people’.

‘The nation’, on the other hand, beholds an even more ambiguous position in modern social and political life. Its broad and diffuse institutionalization (Billig 1995) enables it to signify not only diverse social configurations, but multiple forms of exclusions as well, which hark back to the question of ‘Us and Them’. ‘The nation’ may signify banal differences, such as ‘our national foods’ and ‘our national traditions’, and bellicose forms of exclusion that may enable exploitation, oppression and violence (e.g. against ethnic minorities and immigrants). Most importantly, ‘the nation’ is what symbolically demarcates the (institutional) limits of modern political communities (e.g. ‘the nation-state’, ‘national citizenship’, ‘national sovereignty’, ‘national elections’, etc.) (Anastasiou 2022: 155–190). In other words, the notion of ‘the nation’ conjures up a world outlook, wherein the limits of ‘culture’ and ‘society’ are seen as being coeval and coterminous with a particular political apparatus operating over a determinate territory (Anderson 2006; Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 2012; Kedourie 1961). This particular outlook is registered in the literature as ‘the nationalist principle’ – the normative assumption that the limits of a particular cultural community should coincide with the limits of its political structures (Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 2012; Kedourie 1961).

The implication here is that political rhetoric and practice are often overdetermined by national(ist) modalities (lifeforms, narratives, imaginaries, etc.). We can very well suggest that in the European tradition, politically salient concepts such as ‘sovereignty’, ‘democracy’ and ‘the people’ have historically been framed, both symbolically and in practice, in national(ist) terms (Greenfeld 1992; Hobsbawm 2012: 80–100). The provision of rights, as an example, in all its instantiations, was principally oriented toward ‘national citizens’. Relatedly, ‘the people’, as the bearer of sovereignty, as the collective democratic subject of modernity, has likewise acquired pronounced national(ist) overtones following the consolidation of sovereign territorial states. Liah Greenfeld (1992: 3–13) goes as far as to identify the articulation of ‘the people’ *as specifically* ‘nation’, as a key feature of modernity. This association is not absolute and is in some cases contested. But it nonetheless consists in a most pervasive social and political outlook. This merely reflects nationalism’s hegemonic grip, following its general though uneven diffusion in modern social and political life (Anastasiou 2022: 155–190).

The associated semiotic ambiguities should be explicated. Populist politics, owing to the ‘political success’ of the ‘nationalist principle’, may at once reference universalistic and particularistic imaginaries. ‘The people’ designates the universal democratic subject, and either implicitly or explicitly references the exclusive nation. This semiotic gamut constitutes the terrain of populist political possibilities, ranging from radically inclusive forms that deploy universalistic conceptions of the people to radically exclusive conceptions of the people (e.g. fascist). Populist politics seem to oscillate within these semiotic parameters.

There is an ongoing debate in the literature as to whether populism is a product of ‘demand’- or ‘supply’-side factors (see Golder 2016). In short, ‘demand-side’ explanations consider populism to be a by-product of citizens’ grievances and demands, whether economic, political or social. Conversely, ‘supply-side’ explanations highlight the importance of political

opportunity structures and political actors' effectiveness in capitalizing from such opportunity structures.

To overcome this dichotomous reasoning, one could maintain that both 'demand' and 'supply' side factors are methodologically relevant and that the configuration of populist politics, whether inclusive or exclusive, depends on the interaction between such factors. The populism/nationalism nexus is contingent in character and depends on, among other things, historical parameters, the ideological context, windows of political opportunity, political party efficacy, political imagination, etc. (Golder 2016; Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017). Thus, analytic efforts cannot proceed on the basis of unwavering operational definitions, precisely because this may aprioristically exclude populist manifestations that do not conform to the parameters of a given definition (Laclau 2005). Specifically with regard to the question of nationalism, research should not solely inquire whether a populist configuration is nationalist or not. The limitations of such approaches were documented in the preceding section. Rather, the analysis should also inquire *to what extent* (Laclau 1990: 36–37) a populist configuration *may* be nationalist, detailing *the manner by which* populist and nationalist elements empirically intersect in the observed context. In this respect, the methodological advantages of 'minimal definition' and formal-discursive approaches should be highlighted (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2020; Stavrakakis et al. 2017: 423–424). By delimiting definitions to a bare minimum, such approaches are able to capture a diverse range of populist and/or nationalist manifestations.

At a subsequent stage, the complexities and nuances of populist-nationalist interactions can be deduced following empirical observation. But further methodological considerations are warranted. In deciphering the precise content of empirical manifestations, the analytic task consists in revealing the multi-layered meaningful clusters and identity formation processes that co-constitute the phenomena of interest. The challenge consists in revealing the complexity of the processes at play, without recourse to essentialist understandings of populism and nationalism. We consequently deem it methodologically prudent to understand populism and nationalism as sets of family resemblances (Wittgenstein 1967) that are contextually situated and, in certain cases, historically entrenched (Laclau 1990: 35–36). The notion of family resemblances is here deployed to designate the empirical association between particular elements (e.g. narratives, symbols, imaginaries, practices), but with a very important qualifier: that there is not a single element that is common to *all* populist and/or nationalist manifestations. Understanding populism and nationalism as 'socio-historical backdrops' and 'repertoires' of variable but symbolically related narratives and practices in the absence of any universal characteristic, appropriately orients the researcher while precluding potential analytic biases. In analysing the constitutive dimensions of such intersections, the researcher could then inquire about causal efficacy: In a given context, which elements of a populist-nationalist configuration seem to be the most salient and politically efficacious? How do these intersections acquire salience? And what political effects do they tend to engender? Lastly, it is paramount to examine contextual strategic considerations, as articulations of 'the nation' in populist configurations very often reflect the context of *political competition*.

THE PEOPLE AND THE NATION IN POLITICAL COMPETITION

'Long live Chile! Long live the people! Long live the workers!' With these words, Salvador Allende ended his last speech on the radio, shortly before dying during the coup of 11

September 1973 (Allende 1973). ‘Defending the interests of the workers, the people and the Country’. This is a slogan that the Portuguese Communist Party still uses frequently, resembling Allende’s words of 50 years earlier (PCP 2019). What do these expressions indicate? Do they suggest that in Chile and Portugal national identity resembles the popular one, which in turn resembles the workers’ one? Not necessarily. As we have seen in previous sections, the empirical association between ‘the people’ and ‘the nation’ can be attributed to contextual socio-historical parameters; but there is more to it than that: the discursive agency of political actors.

In fact, in analysing how popular and national identities are articulated together in political discourses, it is necessary to not only examine the socio-historical framework, but also how these identities are deployed strategically in the context of political competition. Scholars of populism have highlighted that actors from across the ideological spectrum may employ rhetorical appeals to ‘the people’ in efforts of acquiring/maintaining power, mobilizing supporters and fostering identifications (Barr 2018; Mouffe 2018; Stavrakakis et al. 2017; Weyland 2017). Similarly, scholars of nationalism have identified appeals to ‘the nation’ as a key component of political legitimization strategies, where actors attempt to legitimize themselves by invoking the emotion-charged symbolisms of the nation (Billig 1995; Finlayson 1998). Accordingly, Allende’s and the Portuguese Communist Party’s rhetorical references to the people and the nation serve to provide legitimacy to their political identity and values, by associating themselves with the apparent *naturalness* of the nation and the people.

In so doing, entrenched conceptions of nation and people are not only reproduced, but potentially modified (i.e. resignified). Indeed, the creation of new meanings is a crucial dimension of political competition (Laclau 1994, 1996). In this sense, political actors that invoke ‘the nation’ and ‘the people’ do so not only to obtain greater legitimacy, but also to shape and control the meaning of these categories. When actors talk about the people and the nation, they usually define these terms according to their *own image and likeness*: they frame these identities according to their own political values, even if these values do not (fully) match with those that are socially entrenched. In so doing, they potentially create new meanings and new articulations (Laclau 2003). This ‘battle of meanings’ over value-salient notions constitutes a central dimension of hegemonic politics (Laclau and Mouffe 2001).

Certainly, socially entrenched meanings heavily influence the ways in which new political articulations can be carried out. A political articulation that is contiguous with entrenched meanings¹ has potentially higher political efficacy. This is the case of Allende and the Portuguese Communist Party. Their rhetorical connection between nation, people and workers is a specific and deliberate political articulation, rather than a pre-given contextual element. In Chile and Portugal, historical sedimentations of meanings favour(ed) a popular – and even workers’ – reading of national belonging (see Fishman 2018; Neves 2008; Vallejos 2003).

Yet, new political articulations do not necessarily need to hinge upon existing and entrenched meaningful configurations. For example, Podemos’ articulation of Spanish identity within a left-populist strategy (Custodi 2021) openly clashed with existing dominant conceptions of Spanish identity, which had been closely associated with state-centric, conservative and ethno-cultural meanings, following 36 years of fascist dictatorship (1939–1975). In fact, Francisco Franco had been very successful in associating the idea of ‘Spain’ with far-right political values, monoculturalism, administrative centralism and ultimately with the regime itself (Herrera and Miley 2018: 203; Núñez Seixas 2010; Ruiz Jiménez et al. 2015).

Nevertheless, Podemos, especially during the 2014–2016 period, made deliberate attempts at resignifying national pride and belonging (Custodi and Caiani 2021).

In order for the party to successfully perform a politics centred on the idea of ‘the people’, Podemos’ leaders were convinced that they also had to wrest national identity from the grasp of the right and resignify it with different values (Errejón 2017a; Iglesias 2014), towards the idea of ‘Spain as a country of the People against the antipatriotic elites’ (Errejón 2017b). By resignifying national pride and belonging, Podemos’ leadership constructed an image of Spain that referred to an inclusive welfare state, to people’s mobilization and to a moral community that is not bound together by any ethno-cultural justification (Custodi 2021). Accordingly, the party leaders framed the humble working people as patriots and the corrupt elite as an enemy of the fatherland (Custodi and Padoan 2022).

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we examined the populism/nationalism nexus and the relationship between the two corresponding identities: the people and the nation. The notion of nationalism occupies an ambiguous and often contested position in populism studies: it is either equated to populism itself, or treated as an analytically distinct phenomenon, much as it interacts with populism in concrete politics. As we argued, scholarship drawing from the latter approach is better suited to grasp the plurality of forms that the populism/nationalism nexus assumes in the empirical world. Furthermore, we pointed out that analyses of the nationalism/populism nexus would benefit from examining identity formation processes that are associated with ‘the nation’ and ‘the people’: how they evolved historically, what role they play in fostering forms of identification and how they are contested in politics.

In most of today’s Western countries, political competition is still highly nationalized and the political concepts of people and nation, however distinct, consist in spectrums of meaning that overlap and interconnect. Accordingly, populist rhetoric and practices are often overdetermined by national(ist) narratives and imaginaries. It is thus politically difficult (albeit not *a priori* impossible) to conceive the people as untied from the nation. There is a notion, made famous by Antonio Gramsci, which helps illuminate the nationalism/populism nexus presented in this chapter: the ‘national-popular’ (Gramsci 1935). Gramsci used this notion in his Prison Notebooks to indicate what is both national and popular, with specific reference to cultural production: literary or artistic works that express the distinctive characteristics of national culture and are also recognized as representative of and by the people. According to Gramsci, the national-popular factor is crucial in politics: informed by the history of French Jacobins, he was convinced that any actor fighting for ruling the country must embody and identify itself as both the people and the country – i.e. the ‘People-Nation’ – in order to be successful (Gramsci 1935). Needless to say, Gramsci’s reasoning was largely strategic, centred on how the labour movement could achieve victory. Yet, Gramsci’s insight has analytical implications that go beyond the normative dimension. In fact, the political overlap of national and popular identities discussed in this chapter matches Gramsci’s claim that actors need to build a ‘national-popular collective will’ in order to achieve political power. This still seems to be the underlying premise that – consciously or unconsciously – drives many Western political actors in their hegemonic ambitions. That being said, the question of whether, at this historical

juncture, there exist substantive political possibilities beyond this underlying premise remains open and deserves greater theoretical, as well as political, attention.

NOTE

1. This should not be understood in a too rigid and univocal sense. Historically entrenched identities, such as nation and people, are composed of a plurality of different meanings. The prevalence of one meaning over the other does not imply the total disappearance of the latter. Thus, identities are a matrix of meanings and social practices that are often heterogeneous and ‘contradictory’, and can potentially pave the way to different political configurations of meanings.

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3. Anti-populism, meritocracy and (technocratic) elitism

Savvas Voutyras

INTRODUCTION

During the last decade or so, public life in Western liberal democratic societies has been marked by turbulence and polarization. It is not only that conflicts over various issues have become intense and bitter (economic agendas, immigration, etc.); we also see a decline in citizens' trust towards national and international institutions, including their countries' party systems (many of which have undergone historic transformations after recent election results). Alongside this, the character and tone of public debate has become aggressive and blunt. Few would deny that we are indeed facing such developments. That the root cause of them all, however, is 'populism', has become one of the most widespread clichés of our time, circulated by liberal politicians, media and various organizations. 'Populism' was the 2017 'word of the year' for *Cambridge Dictionary* (2017), after the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump were attributed to it, while widely read centrist newspapers (e.g. *The Guardian* and *The Financial Times*) held extensive series dedicated to it, often linking it to the socio-political malaises of our time. Later, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, 'populism' again proved to be a flexible enough category to be readily applied to those who questioned the measures proposed by experts – or the existence of the pandemic altogether (Galanopoulos and Venizelos 2021; Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2020). As Yannis Stavrakakis (2017: 1) noted, we do not just talk about populism; rather, we 'cannot stop talking' about it. In fact, we cannot stop talking *pejoratively* about it.

The aim of this chapter is twofold. On one hand, it aims to present 'anti-populism' as a distinct political discourse primarily aimed at delegitimizing challenges to the status quo. On the other hand, it seeks to flesh out some of the defining normative and ideological features of today's anti-populism. The first section describes the contemporary political and scholarly context in which anti-populism emerges. The main claim here is that a proper understanding of populism (either seen as a political phenomenon or as a concept) requires making sense of the ways in which it has been confronted by its opponents. The second section links anti-populism to broader historical tendencies against mass politics, which have found their contemporary form in what historian Christopher Lasch called 'the revolt of the elites'. Proceeding from there, the rest of the chapter zooms in on two of anti-populism's main features. Thus, the third section presents a critical discussion of meritocracy, as a principle of distribution and recognition of worth. The final section discusses technocracy and the narrow, even distorted, conceptions of democracy and politics found in pro-technocratic anti-populism.

ANTI-POPULISM: THE OTHER OF POPULISM

‘Populism’s’ frequent weaponization in political, media and institutional discourse often takes the form of a catch-all: an easy way of discrediting, but also obscuring, diverse challenges to the status quo (economic egalitarian, nativist or other). For similar reasons, some scholars note that populism constitutes ‘One of the most used and abused terms ... At times it seems that almost every politician, at least those we do not like, is a populist’ (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012: 1). Populism constitutes an *exonym*: today there are very few politicians, parties or movements who present themselves as ‘populist’. Rather, ‘populist’ is a negative characterization attached to certain actors and groups by their opponents from the outside.

Historically, this was not always the case. Famously, it was the United States (US) People’s Party that introduced the term into the political vocabulary, and whose members proudly adopted the name ‘populists’. The American populists developed an egalitarian agenda committed to defending the interests of ‘the people’, the underprivileged majority, from the power of elites, whose interests were being prioritized by the main parties (Frank 2020). The pejorative use of the term as we know it today, not adopted as a name by anyone, appeared for the first time after the Second World War – a long time after the decline of the populist movement – and has kept spreading since then. Even more paradoxically, populism-as-a-taint is something that grew in times during which the referent of ‘the people’ – the category on which populism depended – became more and more marginal in political discourse (D’Eramo 2013: 8). While it could be argued that this is simply a conceptually and historically inaccurate use of ‘populism’, the issue with such uses of is not simply about accuracy. Such uses have their own performative effects on political communication – and political conduct more generally; most importantly, the emergence of *anti-populism* as a distinct political discourse. While we are used to hearing about populism all the time, ‘anti-populism’ has a much less familiar ring to it. As Benjamin Moffitt (2018: 2) has argued, this may be because ‘anti-populism is not a clear ideological disposition or mode of governance, but rather an odd mix of ideological and strategic bedfellows pulled together in a temporary alliance of opposition to populism’. Even in academic discourse, anti-populism has received little attention, let alone scrutiny. Given that anti-populism tends to be the natural or default position in academia, it has become ‘somewhat invisible and seemingly unworthy of explicit study’ (2018: 5).

However, as Stavrakakis et al. (2018) note, there is a need to study populism in conjunction with anti-populism, if we are to make full sense of the recent developments routinely linked to populism. Following the post-structuralist insight that identity is premised on difference, they argue that populism and anti-populism are engaged in a dialectical relation of *mutual constitution*, and the study of anti-populism should be seen as a *sine qua non* for achieving a broader and more comprehensive understanding of populism and its role in contemporary politics. Empirical observations and analysis provide support to this point. In many countries – especially in the European context – the traditional left/right divide has given way to a populism/anti-populism one. We have seen former political opponents (typically the two main centre-left and centre-right parties – i.e. the political mainstream) coming together to a common front against ‘populism’ (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2019).

The deployment of ‘populism’ as a pejorative label is a feature of the rhetoric of the liberal centre, including politicians and media associated with both the centre-right and the centre-left. The use of such label to characterize their opponents – the non-centre – effects the blurring of the very significant differences between those opponents (think of the exclusive xenophobic

nationalism at the core of right-wing populism versus the inclusive economic egalitarianism that constitutes the central feature of left-wing populism). In anti-populism, therefore, we see the revival of the so-called ‘horseshoe theory’; the two ‘extremes’ are similar, and they are similar precisely by virtue of being ‘extremes’ in a specific symmetrical depiction of the political spectrum. The operation of this as a delegitimizing tactic is clear: since everyone *else* is labelled as ‘populist’, liberal anti-populists can effectively claim that there is no alternative to the centrist line – at least not a *legitimate* one (Rancière 2017).

While the call for a less polarizing – and maybe even consensus-seeking – political debate initially seems obvious, we should resist falling for it too easily. As Michael Sandel (2018) notes, even when entangled with xenophobic or nationalist sentiments, populism often involves a kernel of legitimate grievances of various types – economic, moral and cultural. A rushed and unconditional condemnation of populism’s adversariality, then, endangers hiding under the carpet a series of justified challenges to the status quo. Staying at the level of condemning populists for division and polarization, while systematically failing to understand and engage with these grievances, is akin to tone policing: it shifts the focus away from one’s claims and towards the *way* in which these are expressed (the stereotype of the ‘angry’, ‘uncivil’, ‘vulgar’ populist). Furthermore, we have to scrutinize the ways in which the anti-populist forces, the political mainstream, have been responding to these challenges while seeking decontestation of the status quo. This requires, on the one hand, an understanding of the context in which the populism/anti-populism cleavage emerges and, on the other, an engagement with the main ideological-normative aspects of anti-populism.

THE REVOLT OF THE ELITES

[D]enunciations of populism like the ones we hear so frequently nowadays arise from a long tradition of pessimism about popular sovereignty and democratic participation... The name I give to that pessimistic tradition is ‘anti-populism’, and... we will find it using the same rhetoric over and over again... Its most toxic ingredient – a highbrow contempt for ordinary Americans – is as poisonous today as it was in the Victorian era or in the Great Depression. (Frank 2020: 16)

Anti-populism is not entirely new. At its core, it comprises convictions and dispositions regarding the place and role of ordinary citizens (the many, the multitude, *the people*) in the political process, which go a long way back. More specifically, it captures a suspicion towards the masses and a desire to limit their political involvement, described by some as ‘demophobia’ (Marlière 2013). A genealogy of anti-populism would take us all the way back to the formation of mass societies following the Industrial Revolution, the subsequent emergence of mass politics and the fear the latter caused to the upper classes of the time. It is against this backdrop that Gustave Le Bon developed his crowd psychology, in which he described crowds as mobs who act in irrational and impulsive ways, overtaken by their most violent instincts and ‘hypnotized’ by master figures who turn them into their instruments. The medical metaphor of the disease runs through Le Bon’s description of the crowd (D’Eramo 2013: 11–12; Laclau 2005: 21–30), effectively seeing collective action as such a pathology. The main thrust of Le Bon’s theory became a commonplace in the Western political tradition and has had a lasting influence, informing elite attitudes toward egalitarian struggles ever since. In his history of American anti-populism, Thomas Frank (2020) provides some powerful illustrations of such reactions against the rise of the People’s Party in the late nineteenth century and

Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s. In both cases, the masses were depicted as mobs motivated by envy and revenge, their leading figures as demagogues, the reforms they sought as based on ignorance and hubris towards the 'natural order of things'.

More than any other time, the denouncement of populism, as expressed today by the liberal centre, takes place in the name of a commitment to democracy. But, while political and media elites claim to defend democracy from the populist threat, others have argued that it is the core norms and implications of anti-populism that run counter to – and even reverse – egalitarian democratic achievement. One of those suspicious of the commitment of elites to democracy was American historian Christopher Lasch, an author vocal about his own populist sympathies, who left us one of the starkest warnings about the transformation of elites and elite culture. The title of his most relevant work, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (Lasch 1994), is a reference to the 1930 classic *The Revolt of the Masses* by José Ortega y Gasset, which Lasch seeks to revisit in light of the big shifts that took place in the few decades before the 1990s. In the interwar period, echoing American anti-populism, Ortega warned about the emerging threat for Western civilization that he saw in the rise of the masses to power – at the time exemplified by socialism and fascism. The 'mass man' differs very starkly from the subject at the heart of previous socio-historical transformations who had a sense of historic duty, held themselves to high standards and assumed responsibility for the values and ideals they expressed. In contrast, the mass man is characterized by resentment, ignorance and a sense of entitlement without responsibility, while despising duties and obligations. He is the 'spoiled child of human history' (Ortega y Gasset, in Lasch 1994: 24).

Sixty-odd years later, Lasch notes how things have changed. The dangerous characteristics Ortega saw in the masses, Lasch believes are now most visible in the elites that Ortega saw as the natural vanguards and guardians of Western social and cultural achievement. Ordinary people are more likely to be suspicious towards fast and constant social transformations associated with radical-progressive ideas (including the very notion of 'progress') when compared to the elite classes. And it is precisely because of this that they are met with contempt by today's 'progressive' elites. It is the elites who have abandoned the virtues Ortega saw in them, such as the traditional values of restraint, prudence and responsibility. Economic transformation, in particular regarding distribution, is a testament to this. The post-war 'golden age' of capitalism came with redistributive policies pushing towards a 'democratisation of abundance' (Lasch 1994: 29–30). However, a trend in the opposite direction emerged in the late 1970s that has since expanded and intensified. By 1991, Lasch (1994: 45) notes, the top 20 per cent in the US controlled 50 per cent of the country's wealth. The redesigning of the economy to focus on finance, information and services, the loss of jobs caused by the migration of manufacturing and the increase of part-time work are also telling of the gap between the traditional working class and the new classes of professionals and white-collar workers of the globalized economy. After more than four decades of neoliberalism, these shifts have intensified further. By 2019, the US top 20 per cent became in control of 77 per cent of the country's wealth (Sawhill and Pulliam 2019). The gig economy (Crouch 2019) characterizes the working conditions of a large number of working individuals in the West, while economic precariousness has given rise to an entirely new social underclass, the 'precarariat' (Standing 2011). For Lasch, it is not only that the elites – and not the masses, as Ortega feared – are in control, but that they also seem to be increasingly losing interest in the welfare of the societies they control.

Economic developments are only a part of the picture. What Lasch points to is that the upper-middle classes are not distinguished from the rest only by their higher income, but

also by their outright different lifestyle and culture. These new elites are not the traditional bourgeois class:

Their investment in education and information, as opposed to property, distinguishes them from the rich bourgeoisie, the ascendancy of which characterized an earlier stage of capitalism, and from the old proprietary class – the middle class, in the strict sense of the term – that once made up the bulk of the population. (Lasch 1994: 34)

They are obsessed with education and credentials, and it is on the basis of such achievements that they see themselves as ‘the best and the brightest’ (Lasch 1994: 39). The elite who constitute the target of Lasch’s polemic have more in common with the elite of other advanced societies than with their fellow Americans. Their independence from public services, their involvement in the global market, leisure and cultural activities across borders, has transformed their sense of place and civic obligation – including their declining sense of obligation to contribute to the public services they themselves do not need anymore (Lasch 1994: 45–47). Their secession from the ‘common fate’ and their insulation in their own enclaves resemble aristocratic rather than democratic arrangements and historical precedents. In ‘populist’ terms, the elite do not only secure an increasingly larger share of wealth and social goods for themselves; they also essentially remove themselves from ‘the rest’ (i.e. the people) and rid themselves of any duty towards them.

MERITOCRACY AND ELITIST ARROGANCE

The transformation Lasch described is intertwined with a major political shift in Western democracies that also begins in the 1990s. This comprises the transformation of political parties of the left – labour, social-democratic and socialist parties – into ‘centre-left’ parties, after adopting ‘Third Way’ politics, effectively aligning themselves with the neoliberal approach to economic policy and the primacy of the market introduced by the right. The claim was that the neoliberalism of the right was unfair, as it allowed inequalities of birth to determine outcomes. A just society would allow everyone the opportunity to develop their talents and reach their full potential, and to be rewarded accordingly. Alongside this, and as a result, the centre-left replaced its loyalty to the working and lower middle classes with a loyalty to the new elite of the ‘credentialled’ professional class. These parties also replaced their commitment to equality with ‘equality of opportunity’. The social ideal that we should strive to achieve came to be known as *meritocracy*, and it constitutes the moral pillar of the arrangement described so far. Meritocracy is tightly linked to the idea of social mobility, which has been for decades, in Western societies, an undisputed social goal.

This is how the terms ‘merit’, ‘opportunity’ and ‘mobility’ became so central in political discourse. Tony Blair’s brand of New Labour is probably the most characteristic example of this: ‘That is the true Party of aspiration, of opportunity, dedicated to creating a genuine meritocratic Britain where people can get to the highest level their talents take them; where we break down every barrier, every impediment to our big idea – the development of human potential’ (Blair 2001). Blair justified his government’s policies by pointing to the new rising class, unlike the elites of the past, as a meritorious one: ‘Slowly but surely the old establishment is being replaced by a new, larger, more meritocratic middle class’ (Blair 1999). The meritocratic ideal has had a strong ideological influence, since it was also embraced by the

centre-right and thus became a new ‘common sense’. David Cameron (2012), conservative United Kingdom (UK) prime minister, promised to turn the UK into an ‘aspiration nation’, which was precisely his own version of meritocracy; a vision that was not only an economic, but also a moral one. And Theresa May, Cameron’s successor, was also explicit about her vision of turning Britain into:

the world’s great meritocracy – a country where everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talent and their hard work will allow... And I want Britain to be a place where advantage is based on merit not privilege; where it’s your talent and hard work that matter, not where you were born, who your parents are or what your accent sounds like. (May 2016)

Something similar could be seen in other Western democracies. In the US, meritocracy was captured in one of Barack Obama’s most circulated slogans: ‘Here in America, you can make it if you try’. Mitt Romney, his Republican opponent in the 2012 presidential election, also framed himself as a committed meritocrat. Nevertheless, the centre-left has been more faithful to the idea: in the UK and the US, references to meritocracy disappeared from the discourse of the right during the administrations of Boris Johnson and Donald Trump.

Why is meritocracy relevant to a discussion about anti-populism? Meritocracy forms the moral narrative through which the privileged status enjoyed by the elites is legitimated. Unlike a hereditary aristocracy of birth, which we rightly take to be morally arbitrary, in a meritocratic setting the allocation of position and rewards is justified, we are told. Meritocracy allows today’s elites to see and present themselves as self-made, their success as the result of their own talent and hard work and – it follows from this – to believe they do not owe much to the rest.

Several authors (Bloodworth 2016; Littler 2017) have already pointed out that, in practice, meritocracy is a façade; it distorts the actual way in which the world works. The liberal societies that talk about meritocracy are themselves far from fulfilling the principle. The lottery of birth – i.e. family wealth – is still the strongest determinant of how well one does in life. In *The Meritocracy Trap*, Daniel Markovits demonstrates this quite clearly by looking at the socio-economic make-up of Ivy League college students in the US – those who will later be eligible for the most prestigious and well-paying jobs. At Harvard and Yale, in particular, ‘more students come from households in the top 1 percent of the income distribution than from the entire bottom half’ (Markovits 2019). One’s future cannot transcend the limits set by pedigree, even in institutions like the universities, who see themselves as temples of meritocracy. Faith in meritocracy is very deeply ingrained in Western culture. What is more, surveys have revealed that a large part of the populations of post-industrial economies do not just believe that they *should* live in a meritocratic society, but also that they *do* live in one already (Kunovich and Slomeczynski 2007). A recent survey (Duffy et al. 2021) researching attitudes towards inequality in the UK, conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, found that most Britons believe that the main drivers of success are hard work and ambition and that, even during the pandemic, job losses were more likely to be the result of personal failure rather than circumstances beyond one’s control.

However, what puts this discussion at the heart of the study of anti-populism is that populism is seen by elites as the main threat to meritocracy: ‘What makes populism truly dangerous, our modern-day anti-populist experts concur, is that it refuses to acknowledge the hierarchy of meritocratic achievement’ (Frank 2020: 47). The disregard of meritocracy is seen as scandalous by anti-populists. A perfect illustration of this can be found in the controversy around

educational reform in the Greek school system in 2017, introduced by the then-governing populist SYRIZA. The controversy in question was actually focused on a rather minor issue, namely a change to the selection of students who would be flagbearers in school events. While the student with the highest marks had been, until then, the one to carry the national flag in all formal events, SYRIZA introduced a new system according to which the flagbearer would be chosen by lot. The rationale was that, since bearing the flag is about expressing patriotism, then every student should be equally eligible to carry the national symbol; selection should not be determined by performance. Right-wing Nea Dimokratia saw this as a major moral transgression, a general praising of mediocrity and lack of ambition. They issued a press release condemning the reform as destructive for the youth because of its anti-meritocratic spirit: ‘The country’s future generations cannot progress in life if they are evaluated on the basis of chance and gambling... Chance, gambling, worthlessness, the logic of minimal effort are SYRIZA’s and Mr Tsipras’s philosophy of life’ (Nea Dimokratia 2017). When Kyriakos Mitsotakis (the incumbent prime minister), as newly appointed leader of Nea Dimokratia, unleashed a tirade against populism in his party’s annual conference in 2016, he associated ‘leveling egalitarianism’ with the ‘political extremes’ who are ‘hostile to meritocracy and the rewarding of hard work’ (Mitsotakis 2016).

However, meritocracy works in the opposite direction to any meaningful understanding of egalitarianism. As Lasch put it:

The notion that egalitarian purposes could be served by the ‘restoration’ of upward mobility betrayed a fundamental misunderstanding. High rates of mobility are by no means inconsistent with a system of stratification that concentrates power and privilege in a ruling elite. Indeed, the circulation of elites strengthens the principle of hierarchy, furnishing elites with fresh talent and legitimating their ascendancy as a function of merit rather than birth. (Lasch 1994: 77)

The irony about ‘meritocracy’ is that, when the term was coined for the first time by British sociologist Michael Young, it was intended to have a negative connotation. In his novel, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, published in 1958, meritocracy is the name of an imagined dystopian future society in which traditional hierarchies based on social class will be replaced by a hierarchy of merit. The meritocratic society will be based on the distinction between a merited elite controlling power and the meritless multitudes excluded from it. Because factors other than talent and effort will be excluded from determining the distribution of wealth and position, and because everyone will be given the same opportunities to succeed, these outcomes will be just. Any resulting inequality, therefore, cannot be challenged on moral grounds. When meritocracy was adopted by Tony Blair as a banner for New Labour’s vision, Young reacted:

They [the poor] can easily become demoralised by being looked down so woundingly by people who have done well for themselves. It is hard indeed in a society that makes so much of merit to be judged as having none. No underclass has ever been left as morally naked as that... If meritocrats believe, as more and more of them are encouraged to, that their advancement comes from their own merits, they can feel they deserve whatever they can get. They can be insufferably smug. (Young 2001)

In that sense, the corrosive effects of meritocratic ideology extend beyond its function as a principle of distribution, since meritocracy is also a narrative about moral worth. If everyone has access to the same opportunities and some end up doing well while others do not, then the less successful can only blame themselves. As Michael Sandel (2020: 28) claims in his recent book on the topic, ‘Among the winners, it [the meritocratic ethic] generates hubris; among

the losers, humiliation and resentment. These moral sentiments are at the heart of the populist uprising against elites'. And this is not something that only makes sense argumentatively; it is also empirically evidenced. One of the strongest political divides in many Western countries today is the one between those with and those without university degrees (Sandel 2020: 26). Furthermore, support for populist parties is strongly driven by feelings of humiliation stemming from a sense of low social status, i.e. being categorized as 'non-meritorious' – without high educational credentials, a prestigious job or any other meritocratic 'success' (Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2021). Class discontent is overtaken by an even more powerful status discontent; the feeling of being seen as unworthy and looked down on. The distinction between the worthy and unworthy that the 'merit test' results to is often evident in politicians' discourse. Hillary Clinton, commenting on the 2016 US presidential election result, noted: 'I won the places that represent two-thirds of America's gross domestic product... So I won the places that are optimistic, diverse, dynamic, moving forward. And his [Trump's] whole campaign, "Make America Great Again", was looking backwards' (Clinton, in Axios 2018). When Donald Trump was applauded by a crowd of supporters after telling them 'I love the poorly educated', many liberal commentators and social media users rushed to mock his statement, as well as the applause. They failed to recognize the sentiment of vindication after decades of growing meritocratic scorn and humiliation.

TECHNOCRACY AND THE HOLLOWING OUT OF DEMOCRACY

In the beginning of January 2017, a *New Yorker* cartoon widely circulated on social media triggered discussion. The cartoon depicts a man standing in his seat on an airplane. Addressing the rest of the passengers, he says: 'these smug pilots have lost touch with ordinary passengers like us. Who thinks I should fly the plane?'. Several passengers are depicted with raised hands, indicating agreement with the man (McPhail 2017). The cartoon mocks what is seen as an expression of the political ideology that took over US politics after the 2016 elections, i.e. populism.

A typical accusation liberal anti-populists deploy against populism is that it has no respect for specialists and expert knowledge. This claim very closely resembles Plato's critique of democracy. The governing of a state, Plato argued in his famous 'ship of state' allegory, is like the commanding of a ship, i.e. an art that requires specific skills and knowledge – not a job for any ordinary individual. In Plato's ship (state), the sailors (the demagogue politicians democracy fosters) attempt to lure and intoxicate the deaf and short-sighted captain (the sovereign people with their weak judgement) in order to get his authorization to command the ship, while dismissing the navigator (the expert) as a useless 'stargazer', although he is the only one with the knowledge required for commanding the ship through storms and dangerous waters. This is the hubris the populists are accused of today, too, especially in times of economic crisis. Indeed, many centuries after Plato, it is impressive how closely the *New Yorker* cartoon mirrors his allegory.

Not taking into account the forecasts of experts (usually economists today, but also others), the populists seem to be selling us a recipe for disaster. Anti-populists take up the task of salvaging not only their countries from populist incompetence but also the people from themselves, when needed – when they get misguided to support expert-defying agendas.

Plato's support for expert government in the form of the Philosopher King was in line with his outright rejection of democracy. Today's anti-populists, though, seem to want to have their cake and eat it: they favour technocratic rule while also presenting themselves as true democrats – denouncing populists as phoney supporters of democracy. Behind this confrontation between populists and anti-populists seems to lie a crucial conflict between fundamentally different conceptions of democracy. Technocracy can only be compatible with the thinnest of the theories of democracy – often known as the 'competitive elitist' model of democracy, where:

the only full participants are the members of political elites in parties and in public offices. The role of ordinary citizens is not only highly delimited, but it is frequently portrayed as an unwanted infringement on the smooth functioning of 'public' decision-making. All this places considerable strain on the claim of 'competitive elitism' to be democratic. (Held 2006: 156)

Or, as Stavrakakis (2017: 9) puts it, democracy is 'good but only to the extent that the demos would obey the commands of "responsible" technocrats who always know better'.

Technocracy is then another crucial feature of anti-populism; it is closely linked to meritocracy – maybe even an extension of it. They are both grounded on the credentials that justify the status of political and economic elites. If meritocracy is about getting right the distinction between the deserving and the undeserving, and allocating wealth and esteem accordingly, technocracy is about who should qualify to have a say and decide on the important matters. As such, then, the technocratic turn has been seen by many scholars as a worrying development from a democratic point of view (Crouch 2004; Sandel 2018). Over the decades, though, it has been constructed as something unavoidable, even as a *need*. Political elites have been increasingly supporting the line that the issues at the heart of current affairs are of a predominantly technical nature:

Most of us are conditioned for many years to have a political viewpoint – Republican or Democratic, liberal, conservative, or moderate. The fact of the matter is that most of the problems... that we now face are technical problems, are administrative problems. They are very sophisticated judgments... they deal with questions which are now beyond the comprehension of most men. (John Kennedy, in Lasch 1979: 77)

Commenting on the above, Christopher Lasch says that, in that speech, Kennedy 'proclaimed the end of ideology in words that appealed to both these public needs – the need to believe that political decisions are in the hands of dispassionate, bipartisan experts and the need to believe that the problems experts deal with are unintelligible to laymen' (Lasch 1979: 77).

The 'Third Way' orientation of the 1990s – energized by the collapse of 'actually existing socialism' – explicitly promoted the idea that ideological clashes – notably the clash between right and left – are finally over, and that liberal capitalism was now the only game in town. Partisan politics should, then, give way to a politics of consensus at the centre. Given that the big and contentious issues were taken to be resolved, consensus politics also allowed the transfer of a great deal of decision-making power to bureaucrats and technocrats appointed in various offices.

A technocratic vision of politics seems, initially, to be a promising option. Its promise is precisely that it liberates us from the ambiguity politics is constitutively rife with, as well as from the passion and bipartisanship, which can often foster bitter antagonisms and pernicious polarization – aspects that have many times given political encounters a traumatic twist. There

are, however, good reasons to be suspicious of this promise, from a democratic point view. Thinkers as diverse as Colin Crouch (2004) and Chantal Mouffe (2005) have highlighted that democracies have to offer the possibility of choice amongst genuine alternatives, something that tends to disappear when achieving consensus becomes the main goal. This has led to a gradual ‘hollowing out’ of democratic institutions; first and foremost, of the institution that played the key role in democratic competition, the political party. As Peter Mair (2013) has described it, the convergence of the agendas of big parties, and their prioritization of technocratic ‘good governance’, has made citizens lose interest in the parties, something seen in the decline in voter turnout since the 1990s. At the same time, the decline and shrinking of the mass party has led to the withdrawal of political elites from party influence, getting legitimacy and support through institutions and offices further from the reach of popular control.

Crouch, in particular, has warned that the West is sliding towards an arrangement he describes as ‘post-democratic’: ‘a situation where all the institutions of democracy – elections, changes of government, free debate, rule of law – continue, but they become a charade, because democratic institutions have been surpassed as major decision-making entities by small groups of financial and political elites’ (Crouch 2016).

While there is a series of factors contributing to post-democracy, technocracy is definitely amongst the major ones. There is no doubt that governance involves a series of issues that require specialized knowledge that we would like to consult. But recognizing and consulting expertise is one thing, and technocracy is quite another: ‘Conducting our public discourse as if it were possible to outsource moral and political judgment to markets, or to experts and technocrats, has emptied democratic argument of meaning and purpose’ (Sandel 2020: 31). To return to the cartoon this section started with, we should trust the pilots with flying the plane, but we would not authorize them to choose the destination on our behalf. The anti-populist caricaturing is often based on the blurring of such distinctions. In a similar vein, political theorist Ernesto Laclau has offered a sharp exposure of what is at stake in the dismissal of populism:

What is involved in such a disdainful rejection is, I think, the dismissal of politics *tout court*, and the assertion that the management of community is the concern of an administrative power whose source of legitimacy is a proper knowledge of what a ‘good’ community is... ‘Populism’ was always linked to a dangerous excess, which puts the clear-cut moulds of a rational community into question. (Laclau 2005)

Ultimately, anti-populism’s most distinctively ideological function, as seen in its favouring of technocratic politics, is the attempt to conceal the irreducible ambiguity at the very core of politics, for which there are no *a priori*, pre-political solutions. This brings anti-populism in conflict with the democratic ethos, which is founded precisely on the acceptance of this ambiguity, and the need to engage with it politically – something that cannot be superseded by technocratic credentials and virtue. ‘Democracy is the paradoxical government of those who do not embody any title for governing the community’, as Jacques Rancière so succinctly expressed this idea (Rancière et al. 2000).

CONCLUSION

This chapter attempted to make the case for anti-populism as a distinct political discourse and tendency. As populism’s ‘other’, it requires the attention of populism scholars, espe-

cially since populism and anti-populism are entangled in a dialectical relation in which one evolves through its conflict with the other. Seen from a historical perspective, this conflict encompasses the emergence of mass politics and the place of the masses in social and political life, anti-populism representing the suspicious and often hostile stance towards the masses. Anti-populism has become particularly relevant today, given the frequency with which the political mainstream (the liberal centre) has been attacking populism in order to delegitimize the various forms of contestation of the status quo. The chapter thus attempted to grasp and critically assess the normative and ideological grounds on which these delegitimization attempts are based today. In doing this, meritocracy and technocracy were identified as interrelated normative visions and argumentative repertoires, whose logics were deemed problematic and largely in conflict with the values officially espoused by our political systems (including the status quo forces themselves), namely egalitarianism and democracy. It is, indeed, this intensifying conflict that anti-populism attempts to mask through the ‘populism’ scare: ‘Populism is the convenient name under which is dissimulated the exacerbated contradiction between popular legitimacy and expert legitimacy, that is, the difficulty the government of science has in adapting itself to manifestations of democracy and even to the mixed form of representative system’ (Rancière 2014).

While we do not have to – and, most definitely, should not – take *all* expressions of populism as sound, anti-populist appeals to merit and technical expertise as fundamental norms should be resisted as anti-democratic. We should also not forget that in many of these expressions, and definitely in the – historically – most exemplary ones, populist struggles have encapsulated perhaps the most essential aspect of democracy, its ‘redemptive’ dimension, as Margaret Canovan called it. The banishment of populism *as such* from democracy, then, and thus the reduction of democracy to ‘governance’, ‘is rather like trying to keep a church going without faith’ (Canovan 1999: 16).

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PART II

DIACHRONIES

4. Populist sensibilities before ‘populism’: populism’s historic predecessors

Federico Tarragoni

INTRODUCTION: POPULISM’S PRE-HISTORY

One of the main characteristics of contemporary research on populism, which emanates from its construction as a ‘public problem’ by the media, is the omission of historicity: instead of reasoning about the present from the past, scholars often get trapped in a presentist approach to the phenomenon. In fact, populism starts in the nineteenth century, between Russia and the United States, and consolidates as a mode of mass mobilization and governance in Latin America in the twentieth century. Its history is intimately linked to the consolidation of liberal-representative governments, whose incompleteness it points out, whether in terms of the adequacy of democratic representation, in terms of the socio-economic inclusion of the masses or in terms of their capacity to influence decision making (Tarragoni 2021). Nevertheless, its pre-history goes back to the very origins of democracies and republics. A populist sensibility runs through their history, because, while claiming to emanate from some form of popular sovereignty, these ‘governments of the people’ were ruled by elites disconnected from the social needs of the majority.

In this sense, a populist sensibility emerges with the birth of ancient republics, between Athens and Rome. This sensibility opposes a people excluded from the community to elites monopolizing power, in order to challenge the dominant institutions as insufficiently democratic. In these ancient societies, one of the main patterns of political conflict was offered by the cleavage between oligarchs and democrats. On the one hand, we find those who defend the interests of the ruling and possessing classes; on the other hand, those who defend the interests of the governed and the popular classes. This opposition becomes particularly virulent in times of acute political crisis, as in Athens in 404 BC. Supporters of the democratic camp were then labelled by their opponents with the epithet ‘demagogue’, which was used in its pejorative sense by the conservative intellectual elite. In the Roman Republic, a similar cleavage juxtaposed the supporters of the elite (the ‘*Optimates*’) to those of the popular camp (the ‘*Populares*’). This opposition refers to a social conflict between the patricians and the plebs. It exploded on two occasions, during the Plebs’ Secessions on the Aventine. By opposing a plebeian people excluded from the Republic to a patrician elite that enslaved it to its interests, such mobilizations can be very well considered as early historical expressions of a populist sensibility.

It will take two millennia for similar political crises to come to the attention of contemporaries, between the late Middle Ages and the modern era. In 1378, the workers of the Florentine textile industry revolted against their Republic, the jewel of the Italian communal era. These *Ciompi* rose up against the oligarchic corruption of the *res publica*, demanding greater participation of the common people in public affairs. A century and a half later, Niccolò Machiavelli gave a striking formula to the populist sensibility that inspired these mobilizations

by highlighting the opposition between the ‘*popolo*’, with its desire not to be dominated, and the ‘*Grandi*’, the economic and political elites with their *libido dominandi*. The same opposition appears in rural revolts that raged in Europe during the modern era. Focusing on eighteenth-century England, Edward P. Thompson (1971) demonstrates the singularity of the populist sensibility involved, as compared to the urban riots of whom the *Ciampi* had been the political expression. Although strictly economic, their demands (the regulation of corn prices) brought into play a vision of the rights and duties of the people, the rural bourgeoisie (the gentry) and the sovereign.

At the threshold of the contemporary era, this valorization of popular judgement within democracy is reflected in new demands for people’s rights. The first article of the Levellers’ ‘Agreement of the People’ (1649) calls for universal male suffrage. It is this fundamental right that new popular organizations demand in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. On both sides of the English Channel, the Jacobins claim the right of the people to suffrage, to political representation and social justice. The Chartists followed them in 1838 with a ‘People’s Charter’ demanding, among other things, universal suffrage and the abolition of any eligibility requirements. The populist sensibility that ran from the Levellers to the Chartists opposed a people lacking political representation to an *Ancien Régime* elite that had come to be considered as betraying both the nation and the *res publica*. As new democratic republics consolidated, the legal perspective founded on this political sensibility became entrenched at a constitutional level as well. The first constitutional elaboration of this viewpoint can be found in the United States, the first democratic republic in history (1787).

This chapter highlights these three moments in the pre-history of populism: popular criticisms and activities in the Athenian polis and republican Rome; plebeian revolts in the modern era, which brought into play a popular sense of justice; and the first popular movements advocating ‘people’s rights’, i.e. the Levellers, the Jacobins and the Chartists. A comparison between these three moments will show that their common populist sensibility involves a radical and utopian conception of democracy, opposed to another vision (which will be consolidated in liberal-representative governments), emphasizing the competence of an elite to govern on behalf of the people.

AT THE ORIGINS OF A POPULIST SENSIBILITY: ATHENIAN DEMOCRATS AND ROMAN PLEBS

Solon, Clisthenes and Pericles’ reforms established Athenian democracy on two basic principles: (1) the prohibition of debt slavery, which allowed the working classes not to be deprived of their citizenship; and (2) the principle of direct and egalitarian participation in power, without wealth discrimination. It is this double principle, which Hannah Arendt (2005: 118) formalized in the couple *isonomia/isēgoria*, which structured Athenian political life, and which was constantly challenged by the oligarchic camp. Thus, at the end of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC), the oligarchic camp succeeded in installing a bloody regime in Athens – the ‘Thirty Tyrants’ – which immediately restricted the number of citizens to the 3000 wealthiest inhabitants. The democrats then gathered around Thrasybulus in Phylae and succeeded in bringing democracy back to Athens in 403 BC. At the end of this major political crisis (*stásis*), Thrasybulus widened the social spectrum of citizenship, granting it to foreigners (*xenoi*) who had fought in his camp (Azoulay 2014: 706). If one had to locate a single origin for the popu-

list sensibility in history, it would probably be there: in the Athenian democratic camp. They defended democratic institutions against their sworn enemies – the oligarchs and tyrants – and sought to make them more egalitarian (even though in Greece, equality between women and men, citizens and slaves, Athenians and foreigners was still unthinkable). It is along the same logic that Pericles introduced the *misthós* before the Peloponnesian War: this indemnity for participation in public institutions was provided for poor citizens, making it possible to compensate for social inequality within politics.

It is not insignificant that the great figures of the democratic camp – Pericles, Cleon, Cleophon, Hyperbolos and Thrasybulus – were often considered by the conservative intellectual elite as violent and incompetent demagogues. When the word appears in Greek during the sixth century BC, it means the 'driver of the people' (*démagôgos*), i.e. the defender that the people (*dêmos*) choose in order to 'be driven' (*ago*) against the oligarchs (Lane 2012): like the word 'populist' in the nineteenth century, the term 'demagogue' meant something rather positive in the beginning (something 'for the people' or 'close to the people'), that only acquired negative connotations at a later stage. With Pericles, who is the very embodiment of this operation at the time when philosophers and historians seize upon it (fifth century BC), the word becomes pejorative and stigmatizing. By spoiling the people with new public indemnities, Pericles would have made them, in the words of Plato in his *Gorgias*, 'lazy and cowardly and talkative and greedy' (Plato 1864: 115). As a demagogue courting 'the favour of the multitude', he 'bribed the multitude by the wholesale', 'gave the reins to the people, and made his policy one of pleasing them' and was 'ready to yield and give in to the desires of the multitude as a steersman to the breezes', according to Plutarch in his 'Life of Pericles' in the *Parallel Lives* (1916: §§ 7, 9, 11, 15). Although he does not share this charge against Pericles, Thucydides applies it to his successors within the democratic camp: Cleon, Cleophon and Hyperbolos. As 'nasty' demagogues, they would have manipulated the people in the middle of the Peloponnesian War to take irresponsible decisions such as the military expedition to Sicily (415 BC). As Aristotle writes in his *Athenian Constitution*, the manipulation was carried out through aggressive and vulgar rhetoric: Cleon 'is thought to have done the most to corrupt the people by his impetuous outbursts, and was the first person to use bawling and abuse on the platform, and to gird up his cloak before making a public speech, all other persons speaking in orderly fashion' (§ 28). Do we not seem to be hearing the arguments against our contemporary populist tribunes? Besides the *ad hominem* charge,¹ the infamy of the term 'demagogue' stems, more broadly, from a change in the modes of popular participation before and during the Peloponnesian War. The people exercised an increasing control over the actions of the ruling classes, whether in the form of heckling (*thórubos*) in the Assemblies and tribunals (Villacèque 2013) or whistling and laughing at the speakers in the tribune and the theatre (as in Aristophanes' comedies). This growing popular pressure on the political class was, in fact, one of the signs of a democratic revitalization during the Peloponnesian War, which made possible the restoration of democracy by Thrasybulus after the 'Thirty Tyrants' (403 BC). By targeting the demagogues, this intellectual elite also, and above all else, took hold of the new situation of Athenian democracy, confronted with an increased presence of the people (Azoulay and Ismard 2020).

A similar opposition between oligarchs and democrats can be observed in the Roman Republic (527–509 BC) in the form of the division between *Populares* and *Optimates*: on the one hand, the advocates of the 'popular' camp such as the tribunes of the plebs; on the other hand, the defenders of the oligarchy such as the patricians and the Senate. The opposition was

more rhetorical than ideological, within a ruling class seeking to strategically win the support of the people (Le Doze 2010). However, this ‘*popularis*’ position referred to a certain political vision of the social order, which was close to a populist sensibility. Sallust (86–35 BC), a former tribune of the plebs, politically close to Julius Caesar, is the ideal historian to encounter this position without caricatures. In *The Jugurthine War*, he related the speech of a tribune of the plebs, Caius Memmius, who accused the Roman aristocracy in 111 BC of turning into a *factio*: exercising power by a few (*pauci*), with the aim of monopolizing all honours and wealth. He criticized the ‘immense wealth to a few men in power, and loss and infamy to the republic... the authority of the senate, and your own power, have been sacrificed to the bitterest of enemies, and the public interest has been betrayed for money, both at home and abroad’ (§ 31). This idea of a republic being sold to the oligarchy’s interests, with no regard for virtue or public morality, is a leitmotif of populist discourse. It reappears among US People’s Party’s militants at the end of the nineteenth century. One of them, Ignatius Donnelly, at the Omaha Convention in 1892, cried:

we meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin. Corruption dominates the ballot-box, the legislatures, the Congress... The fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few, unprecedented in the history of mankind; and the possessors of these, in turn, despise the republic and endanger liberty. (Pollack 1967: 60)

If this idea could already energize the popular classes 2000 years ago, it was because it corresponded to a powerful social cleavage: that between patricians and plebeians. The plebs had fought to establish the principle that Cleisthenes had left as a legacy to Greek democracy: the interdiction of debt slavery, of debt bondage. Until 326 BC, Roman Law allowed the patricians, creditors of the plebs, to sell insolvent debtors into slavery. It was the perspective of losing freedom, which in Roman Law allowed for capital punishment (inapplicable to citizens), that led the plebeians to secede on the Aventine, in 494 and 449 BC. In his *History of Rome* (II, § 32) the Augustan author Livy considered it a manifestation of civic discord (*sedition*), or even civil war (*bellum civile*). In fact, the two Plebeian Secessions can be seen as a founding moment of what Martin Breugh calls, following Pierre-Simon Ballanche (1829), the ‘plebeian experience’: a subaltern critique of domination coupled with a desire to expand the public sphere (Breugh 2013). This experience is intimately connected to a populist sensibility: the plebeians express their freedom by opposing the oligarchic usurpation of the political community in favour of the desire to create a more popular, i.e. more egalitarian, republic.

TOWARDS A POPULAR SENSE OF JUSTICE: THE *CIOMPI* AND THE NEW RURAL REVOLTS

From the end of the fourteenth century, towards the end of a cycle of economic growth and political modernization that some historians identify with the origins of capitalism, new plebeians emerged to fight against their republic’s oligarchic mutation. Their prototype was the *Ciompi*, active in the most famous republic of the modern age: Florence. These workers in the wool industry, representative of the ‘*popolo minuto*’ (the ‘subaltern people’), had no political representation or even participation in public affairs, as they were deliberately excluded from the draw that governed the Republic. Power was then in the hands of the ‘Guelphs’. This party of notables (‘*magnati*’), favourable towards the Pope, had succeeded in monopolizing the

political institutions, after having plundered its enemies (the 'Ghibellines') and obtained the support of the great urban bourgeoisie, the '*popolo grasso*' (merchants, artisans of the major arts and bankers). This alliance between a predatory ruling class and the upper bourgeoisie was, however, to the detriment of the '*popolo minuto*': the artisans of the minor arts, the urban workers and the paupers. They had been deeply affected by the 1345 bankruptcy, aggravated by the 1347 famine and the outbreak of the Black Death in 1348.

Pushed to the limit by the economic situation and the oligarchic abuses, the *Ciompi* finally rose up on 22 June 1378.² After burning and pillaging Guelph properties, they moved on to the '*Stinche*', the Florentine prisons, to free the workers held there for their debts. We find again here the struggle by populist democrats for the prohibition of imprisonment for debts, a condition of possibility for any republic since antiquity. The *Ciompi* demanded an increase in wages and the creation, by the municipality, of a craft guild for the common people, as well as a more socially egalitarian distribution of political offices (Stella 1993). One of them, Simoncino d'Andrea, known as 'Bugigatto', claimed to his torturers that they wanted above all to 'take part in the government of the city' (Baggioni and Leclerc 2016: 3). This was the vast reform to which Michele di Lando, a worker appointed by popular acclamation as the new Florentine *Gonfaloniere*, devoted himself. The *Ciompi*'s disappointment with their spokesman, who took a pension for himself and granted financial benefits to his allies, led them to choose new representatives: the 'Eight Saints of the People of God'. As Machiavelli wrote in 1532 in his *History of Florence*, 'the city possessed two governments, and was under the direction of two distinct powers' (Machiavelli 1960: 136). The *Ciompi* were above all outraged against their 'sold-out Republic'. It was this same indignation that led them to turn against Di Lando and to appeal to God to provide themselves with 'elected representatives' (in the primary sense of the term 'elected'), responsible for democratizing institutions and moralizing public life. This link between democratization and moralization, with clear messianic overtones, seems to be a constant within populist discourse.³

Even though Machiavelli abhors the 'stench of the Florentine plebs', he is perfectly aware that a populist sensibility benefits democracy. In his *Discourses on Livy* (1531), he formulates this thesis which makes him, for some, a theorist of populism (McCormick 2001) or, at least, of a populist republicanism (Vergara 2020: 236–240). 'In every republic', he writes, 'are two diverse humors, that of the people and that of the great, and [that] all the laws that are made in favor of freedom arise from their disunion, as can easily be seen to have occurred in Rome' (Machiavelli 1996: 16). It is this same opposition that Edward P. Thompson (1974) observes in the 'patrician republic' par excellence that is England since the Glorious Revolution (1688). Like the Florentine *magnati* and *popolo grasso*, a patriciate indeed stands at the head of the British constitutional monarchy: that formed by the two parties that alternated in power, the Whigs and the Tories, and by the great rural bourgeoisie from which they both emerged (the gentry). However, 'the peculiar mode of domination of the gentry implied a weak state and, consequently, a great power of the plebs, the little people' (Thompson 1976: 137). This plebs, which 'resembled the Roman plebs' (Thompson 1976: 144), consisted of urban artisans and rural workers dependent on the gentry. Because of the hegemonic status of the rural bourgeoisie in English society, it is in the countryside that one finds (at least before the institutionalization of labour movements) the epicentre of populist sensibility. The rural plebs was indeed 'one of the terms entering into the definition of the "res publica"' (Thompson 1976: 145).

Between the sixteenth and seventeenth century, new rural revolts irrupted against the gentry and the king. They reflected the close interdependence between the people and the elite, as

a result of the prevailing paternalism. According to Thompson (1971), these rebellious peasants thought that the rulers should be obeyed only if they were able to feed the ruled. When corn prices fluctuated excessively, making it impossible for peasants to survive, this feeding task was not honoured. The peasants could thus legitimately break the contract of subjection that linked them to the rulers. Behind this morally charged view of corn prices, which Thompson calls a ‘moral economy of the crowd’, we find a strong populist sensibility: the desire of the common people to judge the policy that is carried out in their name, against the judgement of a ruling class disconnected from the social needs of the majority.

DEFENDING THE PEOPLE’S RIGHTS: LEVELLERS, JACOBINS AND CHARTISTS

It is also in England that, since the seventeenth century, a legal and political tradition of defending the people’s rights has been developing. It goes back to the Levellers, the authors of the first modern constitution establishing the people’s rights in a republic: the ‘Agreement of the People’ (1647). In the context of the first English revolution (1642–1651), these Levellers brought together different social groups impoverished by the war (artisans and merchants in the towns, soldiers in the so-called ‘New Model Army’). They stood to the left of Cromwell’s party. Following the execution of King Charles I, at the same time as the proclamation of the Republic in May 1649, they published a new version of the 1647 Agreement, which is the first draft of a democratic constitution: *An Agreement of the Free People of England: Tendered as a Peace-Offering to This Distressed Nation*. Its authors, John Lilburne, William Walwyn, Thomas Prince and Richard Overton, were imprisoned in the Tower of London when the text was published on 1 May. Cromwell had just liquidated his left wing in order to turn the new-born republic into a tyranny (Lutaud 1962).

The Levellers demanded, first, legal protections against arbitrary power over the people, i.e. the principle of *habeas corpus* on which every republic is founded. Second, they claimed the main right of the people: the right to suffrage. ‘The Supreme Authority of England and the Territories therewith incorporate, shall be and reside henceforward in a Representative of the People’, and ‘all men of the age of one and twenty veers and upwards... shall have their voices’. The people’s rights were thus restricted to adult men, but ‘not being servants, or receiving alms, or having served in the late King in Arms or voluntary Contributions’ (art. 1). The exclusion of women will be lasting. That of servants and paupers can be explained, within the Levellers’ democratic mentality, by their state of social and psychological dependence towards their masters. At any rate, in this document, a new right of the people is affirmed: that of participating in the life of the Republic, without any discrimination of wealth or social origin, on condition of a minimum independence of judgement.⁴ By establishing this primary right of the people to decide in a republic, the Levellers basically invented the principle of popular sovereignty in democracy (Morgan 1989): a principle which will re-emerge later at the core of populism.

In this history, the Levellers’ direct inheritors were the Jacobins in the eighteenth century,⁵ and the Chartists in the early nineteenth century. The word Jacobin originally referred to the meeting place (the Parisian *Couvent des Jacobins* in rue Saint-Honoré) of the Third Estate’s club of deputies that demanded a constitution, from October 1789. It then referred to the movement of English reformers (Thomas Hardy, John Horne Tooke, John Thelwall) who

founded the London Corresponding Society (1792) on the model of the French Jacobins' club: their aim was to promote the democratization of the British Parliament. Despite their ideological similarities, the term was employed within different political contexts in France and Great Britain. In the French case, the word came to designate, from within, a political current sharing a common vision of the Republic. In the English case, the word was used by the reformers' enemies, who feared a repetition of French revolutionary excesses on British soil. Although the term was never taken up by the English reformers themselves, the controversy over the interpretation of the French Revolution constituted the first moment of publicity for the 'Jacobin cause' in England as well, as indicated by the famous 'pamphlet war' between Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) and Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791), which was followed by the 1794 treason trials against the reformers (Thompson 1994).

Hence, Jacobinism was born as a revolutionary movement, almost simultaneously, both in France and England, during the last decades of the eighteenth century. Its French proponents were socially drawn from the urban bourgeoisie (notably journalists and lawyers), while its English exponents, drawn from urban craft-workers (notably cobblers, small traders and printers), 'more closely resembled the common people who made the French Revolution', those 'sans-culottes of the Parisian sections, whose fervent egalitarianism supported Robespierre's dictatorship and revolutionary war in 1793–94' (Thompson 1968: 171–172). If the main French representative of Jacobinism is Maximilien de Robespierre (1758–1794), its English counterpart is undoubtedly Thomas Paine (1737–1809). The French Jacobins died out after the end of the Terror, and the English at about the same time, after the 1794 treason trials. Their main common point, reminiscent of the Levellers, is the exaltation of popular sovereignty within a democracy.

During the French Revolution, the Jacobins undertook to translate the plural (and contradictory) aspirations for popular sovereignty, originating from the sans-culottes, into a democratic representation. As Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) points out in comparing the French Jacobins with the Italian *Risorgimento*, only the former were able to articulate, in a new revolutionary hegemony, the representation of the popular classes and that of the nation. Their populist sensibility was expressed in the creation of a new democratic subject – the 'national-popular' subject – opposed to an *Ancien Régime's* elite, judged to be traitorous to the people and the nation. The problem of French Jacobinism, which appears centrally in Robespierre's political theory, is how to represent the sovereignty of a divided democratic people, which is supposed to be united in order to exist politically (Rousselière 2021). This is the double difficulty which will appear later within populist politics, especially in Latin America: how to articulate the people's representation and its general will (a problem first formulated by Rousseau); how to link the plurality and unity of the people thus represented.

Unlike the French case, English Jacobinism did not become the governmental ideology of a revolutionary regime. Its populist sensibility was therefore expressed differently. Its horizon was that of an 'absolute democracy', to be achieved against constitutional monarchy and the English state. The opposition between the rulers and the ruled, 'those above' and 'those below', was the way in which Jacobinism formulated its aspiration to a radical democracy, which makes it a political 'radicalism' in the strict sense of the word (Ann Hone 1982). E. P. Thompson emphasizes a key element of this contentious tradition: its vision of some natural 'birthrights' granted to the English people. Some of them had been formalized by the 1689 Bill of Rights, which echoed many of the claims of the Levellers. It was then up to the Jacobins to

extend these natural rights of the people, on the basis of a rhetoric that was formally conservative (the safeguarding of a constitutional tradition), yet substantially revolutionary (the creation of a most egalitarian regime), as in the above-mentioned case of John Wilkes (Thompson 1968: 91). With his *Rights of Man* (1791), Thomas Paine achieved an intellectual revolution within Jacobinism itself. Against the constitutional tradition of 1689, he expressed a new populist sensibility, based on the opposition between a productive class of non-possessors, who contributed through taxation to the general interest, and an idle class of possessors, who monopolized state power and honours. This social opposition, closely articulated with the defence of the people's natural rights, occurred to him directly on the basis of the example of the American Revolution (1776), as evidenced by *Rights of Man's* dedication to George Washington, and more generally by the close links between the English Jacobins and the American colonists (Cone 2017).

This opposition between classes was specifically 'populist' because what was at stake, contrary to the communism of the following century, was not to abolish economic exploitation, but to assign to the people the task of building a democracy whose form should remain partially indeterminate: 'Paine understood that "the nation was always excluded from the debate" in the constitutional controversies of the 18th century. By introducing the nation into the debate, he necessarily moved forces that he could neither control nor foresee. And that is fundamentally democracy' (Thompson 1968: 110).⁶ Thus, the key demand of the first Jacobin organization, the London Corresponding Society, created in January 1792, was the extension of the right to vote to all English men. As for the Levellers, the ultimate aim was to involve the people in building a freer, more equal and fairer Republic.

Forty years after the birth of the London Corresponding Society, a new popular mobilization registered its populist sensibility. The context was the 1832 Reform Act, which included small landowners and shopkeepers in the electorate, while maintaining several restrictions on the right to vote and eligibility. Despite its progressive character, the reform proved disappointing: it reduced the British *res publica* to the interests of the agricultural and commercial worlds, echoing the protectionist legislation adopted a few years earlier (the 1815 Corn Laws). Popular indignation, particularly in urban areas, was strong. In 1838, William Lovett (1800–1877) and the activists of the London Working Men's Association took up the issue, drafting a 'People's Charter', which included numerous demands: universal male suffrage, a secret ballot, a parliamentary indemnity for deputies, the abolition of eligibility quotas and the equalization of electoral districts.

For a long time, based on Marxist interpretations, Chartism was seen as the main working-class response to the Industrial Revolution: a social movement structured by common interests, developing a class consciousness. However, as Gareth Stedman Jones (1983) has shown, Chartism was above all a democratic mobilization, structured by an opposition between a 'working people' excluded from politics, and rural and financial elites (the 'City') controlling republican institutions: the Parliament, the courts and the army. The class compromise between landowners, merchants and finance had enabled Britain to become a great colonial empire, but at the expense of democracy: the vast majority of the people, agricultural and industrial workers, remained excluded from politics. As Stedman Jones writes, 'Radicalism's self-identity was not that of a specific group, but that of the "people" or "nation" against those who monopolized representation and political power and thus financial and economic power' (2007 [1983]: 26). Paraphrasing the Chartist Robert G. Gammage (1820–1888), Stedman Jones specifies the movement's populist sensibility: they thought that "the exclusion [of

popular masses] from political power [was] the cause of all social aberrations”, and that “political power [was] the major cause of opulence” (2007 [1983]: 24). Chartism closely articulated two oppositions – ‘people versus power’ and ‘rich versus poor’ – by postulating that the democratic inclusion of the people would solve the social question. This postulate, typical of a populist sensibility, constitutes a symmetrical inversion of the terms in which Marx and Engels set out their political strategy in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848). In the latter, the resolution of the social question involved the abolition of (capitalist) economic exploitation, thereby improving the political inclusion of the people. This is the lasting dividing line between populists and communists: on the one hand, the defenders of the democratic rights of the people, on the other, the critics of economic exploitation; on the one hand, the advocates of better democratic representation, on the other, the dreamers of an egalitarian society that would abolish all forms of political representation (and *in fine* democracy).

Between the Levellers, the Jacobins and the Chartists, populist sensibility rests on two inalienable rights of the people in a democracy: their right to sovereignty (including the political primacy of the majority’s will) and to political representation (including the right to vote and to be elected). With the consolidation of new democratic republics, this sensibility translates into a constitutional model that emphasizes the people’s rights more than the political order’s stability. The United States of America is a striking example. Their people’s rights were severely limited (by gender, socio-economic and racial restrictions on suffrage and eligibility). Very quickly, two legal-constitutional models, corresponding to two political conceptions of the republic, came into opposition. The first, originating from *The Federalist Papers* (1787–1788) and the presidency of one of their authors, James Madison (1808–1812), emphasized the aristocratic dimension of representative governments: in a good republic, the best ones, elected by the most capable part of the people, should govern while leaving the people out of political affairs (Dupuis-Déri 2013). The second, stemming from the political practice and constitutional interpretation of President Andrew Jackson (1829–1837), stressed the popular character of democratic republics: here, the majority should rule, something that Alexis de Tocqueville judged in his *Democracy in America* (1835) as potentially ‘tyrannical’.

Robert A. Dahl calls the latter ‘populistic democracy’: a constitutional conception of democracy based on the principle of maximizing political equality and popular sovereignty, as opposed to an aristocratic conception of democratic legitimacy. He summarizes it in the following statement: ‘The only rule compatible with decision-making in a populistic democracy is the majority principle... The principle of majority rule prescribes that in choosing among alternatives, the alternative preferred by the greater number is selected’ (Dahl 2006 [1956]: 38). On the one hand, thus, one finds the advocates of an oligarchic republic resembling an ‘elective aristocracy’ (Manin 2010 [1995]); on the other, the proponents of a republic ‘of the people, by the people and for the people’ that submits to the people’s will, however changeable, irrational and incompetent it may be. Within constitutional law, the former model has gradually become hegemonic, to the extent that it has become commonplace to contrast a populist model of democracy with democratic constitutionalism. As Richard D. Parker points out:

the animating *mission* of modern constitutional law is conventionally described as the correction of failures allegedly endemic to majority rule. The mission is to safeguard ‘The Individual’ or ‘minorities’ or even some governmental bodies (the states, the executive, the judiciary, the legislature) supposedly threatened by the force of ordinary political energy. The threat is portrayed as due in part – but only a secondary part – to defects in the institutions through which that force is employed. More basically, the threat is envisioned as coming from the base and dangerous quality of the political

energy driving alike the majority and the ordinary people who hold official power in its name. (Parker 1993: 559–560)

However, if democracy is ‘a regime in which offices are open to ordinary citizens and in which ordinary people are allowed, and even expected, to act collectively to influence, and even control, the government’ (Parker 1993: 532), this popular energy constitutes a legitimate part of democratic dynamics. Insofar as it does not overflow the democratic framework, by converting into fascism, it counteracts a persistent pitfall of republics, which populist sensibilities have denounced throughout history: their tendency to produce – contrary to what Tocqueville feared – a ‘tyranny of the minority’: a tyranny of the ruling elite, of economic lobbies and of educated upper classes.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the populist sensibility examined in this chapter got consolidated ideologically through romantic and utopian socialism (Pierre Leroux, George Sand, Jules Michelet, Matthew Arnold, Victor Hugo (Pessin 1992: 13–20)). The time had come for new political experiments to emerge. Populist experiences arose in three different contexts: in Russia, where a movement of intellectuals, impoverished students and feminists fighting for an ‘integral democracy’ sought to mobilize the peasantry against the tsar (*narodnitchestvo*); in the United States, where a movement of ruined farmers in the South and Midwest fighting for a ‘producers’ republic’ against the growing power of industrial trusts and Wall Street founded in 1892 the first populist party in history, the People’s Party; and in Latin America, where a series of ‘national-popular regimes’ (such as Peronism in Argentina), resulting from post-1929 popular mobilizations against ‘oligarchic-liberal’ republics, created new welfare states.

With these historical experiences, a peculiar way of doing politics appeared. It opposes the people, understood within a democratic utopian horizon, to the elites, understood as the predatory forces dismantling democracy (Tarragoni 2019). Behind this opposition lies another: that between a plebeian, radical and utopian interpretation of democracy and an elitist, moderate and pragmatic interpretation, of which liberal governments are the very model. These two interpretations run through the history of political modernity; both also re-emerge, with their constitutive contradictions, in the current crisis of representative democracies. However, the roots of this opposition go back long before the rise of political modernity. The conflict between a vision of politics open to popular participation and another emphasizing the capacity of elites to govern on behalf of the people is as old as the democratic and republican idea itself. Therefore, if populism is a phenomenon of our modernity, the sensibilities it energizes is what actually links modernity with tradition.

NOTES

1. Its accuracy and legitimacy has since been questioned, in particular about Cleon, by George Grote’s *History of Greece* (1846–1856).
2. A quite similar popular mobilization, dominated by glassmakers and fishermen, broke up in Murano, in the context of the Venetian Republic, on 27 January 1511 (Judde de Larivière 2018).

3. 'The humblest citizen in all the land, when clad in the armor of a righteous cause, is stronger than all the hosts of error. I come to speak to you in defense of a cause as holy as the cause of liberty, the cause of humanity': this is how William Jennings Bryan, candidate for the People's Party, began his famous 'Golden Cross Speech' at the Chicago Democratic Convention (1896). The speech can be found at <https://d.lib.msu.edu/vv1/78>.
4. In order to preserve democratic representation from the 'corrupt interests' (a term that appears twice in the text) of 'factions' (economic, administrative or political lobbies), the Levellers added several specific measures: the ineligibility of army officers and treasury officials, 'so that all may be governed as well as governors' (art. III), immediate non-re-election (art. IV), the total abolition of privileges and equality before the law (art. XIII), the 'democratic recruitment of the juries of assize' (art. XXV) and the 'non-incarceration of debtors' (a leitmotiv of populist sensibility since antiquity, as we have already seen), a practice which brings 'both opprobrium and prejudice to the Republic' (art. XX).
5. The Wilkite agitation of the 1760s, dominated by urban and provincial middle classes, constituted an intermediate moment. Following the claims of the journalist and member of Parliament John Wilkes (1725–1797), it contributed to making 'the people' (understood as the civic-national community) a principle of legitimation of political action. Wilkism created a "'political community" – "the people" – whose members were distinguished by their political positions and practices: by "independence" (i.e. the refusal to be held back by political or economic patronage), public spirit (the willingness to take charge of and evaluate the State and its administrators), and resistance (the capability to oppose an "illegitimate" power in the political sphere)' (Wilson 1998: 234).
6. This same idea will reappear 60 years later in the founding text of Russian populism (*narodnitschestvo*), Alexander Herzen's *On the Development of Revolutionary Ideas in Russia* (2012 [1851]).

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5. The Russian populism of the *Narodniki*: contexts, affinities and legacies

Yiannis Mylonas and Simona Guerra

INTRODUCTION: TRAJECTORIES OF RUSSIAN POPULISM

Narodnism (*narodnichestvo*), or Russian populism, was a diverse, ideological, spiritual and political movement with socialist aspirations that grew during the mid-nineteenth century in Russia. It focused on directing attention to the Russian people (mainly the peasantry) as a source of inspiration for redemption and social change, and as an object of salvation from Tsarist autocracy and from the prospects of capitalism advancing in Russia. The main ideas of the movement were developed by intellectuals living both in Russia and abroad. The radical intellectual Aleksander Herzen was the first to advance the main principles of Russian populism (Mullin 2020: 33) by developing his notion of Russian socialism (Walicki 2015: 255). Franco Venturi (1960: xxxii) sets 1848, the year of the European Revolutions, as the date when the populist movement emerged in Russia. This is associated with the impact of the 1848 Revolutions on the political thought of figures like Herzen and also Nikolaj Vasiljevic Chernisevsky who, among others, played a pivotal role for the populist movement. Venturi (1972 [1952]) also sets 1 March 1881, the date when Tsar Aleksander II was assassinated by the executive committee of the group *Narodnaya Volya* (People's Will) as a turning point for Russian populism, which is then split into different components and fragmented into different political factions, be they socialist-revolutionary, social-democratic, anarchist, Menshevik or Bolshevik. Additionally, the populist name (*Narodniki*) came into effect during the 1870s. Before that, the movement was called communist, socialist, radical or nihilist. Through involving a variety of different intellectuals, revolutionaries and groups, whose analyses and tactics differed and sometimes contradicted each other, Russian populism has had an immense influence in the socialist and revolutionary movements of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russia, with an impact on Russia's 1905 and 1917 Revolutions.

The backwardness of Russia, the poor state of its people and the decadence of the Tsarist regime were important factors in developing revolutionary aspirations, so as to redeem the people and the land (Belfer 1978: 297). At the same time, Russian populism emerged due to a variety of events, such as Russia's defeat in the Crimean War (1853–1856) that challenged the Russian establishment. From the ashes of the Decembrist revolt of 1825, during the interregnum between Aleksander I (1801–1825) and Nicholas I (1825–1855), rebel officers refused to swear allegiance to the new Tsar. Most crucially, the Russian populist movement emerged in order to respond to issues and historical challenges that Russia met in relation to developments taking place in the politico-economically advanced West. The ideas and debates that sprung from the European Revolutions of the 1820s brought a new interest in liberal reforms among Russian intellectuals and the educated Russian urban, who became acquainted with them through their contact with French officers and English travellers (Venturi 1972 [1952]).

During the nineteenth century, Russia was an autocratic empire, based on a largely agrarian economy, inhabited by a largely peasant population that was religious and mostly illiterate, maintaining a certain degree of self-sufficiency. More than a third of the population were serfs, and with the land, remained privately owned until the Emancipation Reform of 1861, under Tsar Aleksander II. Acknowledging the backwardness of Russia when compared to Europe, the Russian populists came up with multiple strategies and practices, as well as a variety of ideological orientations on how to develop Russia, and how to protect the interests and values of the Russian people, principally by trying to reach socialism without passing through capitalism. To this regard, the populists showed great confidence in the collectivist traditions of Russian village life and the Russian peasantry, which they hoped to rescue from capitalist modernization. The common land that was cultivated and used in an egalitarian spirit was seen by Herzen and others as principally a socialist practice, though constrained by serfdom. To this regard, Herzen attempted to fuse a Slavic characteristic (which contained the ‘communism of the common Russian’) and a Western one (related to the ‘personality principle represented by the intelligentsia’) (Walicki 2015: 259). Combined, these characteristics could advance a revolutionary strategy to abolish autocracy and allow Russia to pass to socialism without having to follow the historical trajectory of the West (Mullin 2020: 34).

Russian populism developed different trajectories, both reformist and revolutionary, legal and illegal. The movement included, on the one hand, groups that engaged with terrorist practices in the most revolutionary branches of the People’s Will organization (which also, in important ways, broke ties with Russian populism) and, on the other hand, regressive responses too, associated, for instance, with the Revolutionary Socialist party’s (a non-Marxist socialist group) right-wing branch, which supported the Monarchist White Russians during the Russian civil war, following the party’s break from the Bolsheviks. The main differences between the various populist branches are summarized by Ella Belfer (1978: 298) into two key categories concerning: (1) the question of Russia’s historical and geopolitical position, regarding the trajectory it should follow, whether a ‘Slavic’ or a ‘Western’ one, corresponding to the division between Slavophiles and Westernizers; and (2) the actual timing and tactics of struggle to achieve revolutionary, reformist and political, change, as well as the development of a mass popular movement of enlightened peasants or the focus on elitist actions and conspiratorial practice, including terrorist violence.

In the remainder of this chapter, we outline the ideological trajectory of the nineteenth century variants of Russian populism. By addressing the challenges and contradictions that the *Narodniki* faced, we point to the impact and limits of Marxism with regards to the *Narodniki* movement, until the predominance of the Russian Revolution and the Bolsheviks’ seizure of power.

RUSSIAN POPULISM: MORALISTIC OR PROGRAMMATIC?

Between 1870 and 1873, more and more young people joined a clandestine movement that would become part of the organizations of *Zemlja i Volja* (Land and Freedom) and People’s Will in the following years. This movement lacked a statute, a common blueprint or a clear organizational structure but, led by Nikolaj Vasiljevic Chaykovski, it opened a dialogue with previous social movements, led by Pyotr Lavrov and Mikhail Bakunin, to bring together socialism and anarchism. The specific movement was motivated by the debt felt towards the

peasants. Their politics mainly followed ethical goals, without a political agenda (Venturi 1972 [1952]). These goals were associated with the salvaging of the pure and potentially non-alienated Russian people's 'soul' from the perils of Tsarist autocracy and the advancing capitalism. The people's inherent positive characteristics would also lead to social improvement by saving Russia itself from the threats of autocracy and capitalism. The movement, mostly made up of university students, promoted a library, that they organized and renamed as the 'Jacobins' Club'. Leonid Emmanuelovic Sisko, one of the youngest members, wrote in these years a pamphlet, then brought to press, illegally, in Switzerland in 1972, titled 'A few words, brothers, on how difficult it is to live on the Russian land!' (Bazanov and Alekseeva 1970), using the 'going to the people' invitation.

One of the oldest members of the movement, German Aleksandrovic Lopatin, had met Marx in London, and had translated half of the *Capital* into Russian. Returning to Russia, he sought to inform the youngest members of the work of the First International, having been a member of the General Council and worked on the publication of Marx's *Capital*. Yet, among most of them there was the awareness that most of the European experiences could not be applied to Russia, as the starting conditions were completely different, and the possible solutions had to be new. 'English and French people think about their poor people and think about their misery, but here we have a much poorer worker, without any possible comparison, the Russian worker. They say their people are starving to death, but here we really have people starving to death' (Flerovsky 1933 [1869]).

Vasily Bervi-Flerovsky observed Russian society and pointed to what Marx would have called primitive accumulation, where *kulaki*, the new social class increasing their gains from the 1861 Emancipation Reform, were taking appropriation of the lands and capitals from the *obshchina*,¹ with the peasants losing out. The economic politics of the state was to blame for the poverty of the masses and the only available path out of the situation was the one towards socialism. Russia could not follow the example of Western Europe or the United States, leading, in their view, towards the graveyard of civilization. Influenced by Charles Fourier and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Flerovsky was sceptical towards the use of strikes, and suggested that Russian masses could achieve socialism through collective ownership, solidarity and egalitarianism. Marx himself wrote about Flerovsky in March 1870, pointing to his work and addressing the lack of national identification and positive representation of the workers' fight.

In Russia, a few members of the so-called Tchajkovsky group became workers and farmers themselves (Kropotkin 1989), while others joined the Orthodox Church to become more familiar to the people they were going to meet. Their 'going to the people' was described by Venturi (1972 [1952]) as a Rousseauism action, where politics and ethics meet. Within the Tchajkovsky group, peasants had to take the lead of the *obshchina* and workers in the city had to control the *artjel*.² Their meetings, in the '*izba*' (small Russian countryside dwelling), gathered numerous people, often lasted well beyond midnight and were surrounded by the solemnity of songs that used to close the nights calling for reforms and the revolution (Venturi 1972 [1952]).

A new publication, *Rabotnik* ('The Worker') started to be circulated across the factories. The programme outlined by Petersburg's workers included: (1) the end of the political and economic control of the state, as unjust; (2) the foundation of a people's free organization of *obshchiny*, based on the full equality of political rights and self-government, grounded on Russian common law; (3) the abolition of land property and the adoption of collective agriculture; and (4) a just associative organization of the work, that would give both the rights of

production and the production itself in the hands of workers. Further, they also supported (1) freedom of speech and the press, right of assembly and gathering; (2) abolition of the secret police and judicial processes based on political crimes; (3) abolition of rights and privileges by caste; (4) compulsory free education across all schools and institutes; (5) decrease of the numbers in the army or substitution with the people's army; (6) right of the *obshchina* to self-government, also on matters of taxes and division of the land; (7) abolition of the system of internal passports and free movement; (8) abolition of indirect taxes, and establishment of a direct tax, on income and inheritance; (9) limited working hours and abolition of work for children; and (10) establishment of productive associations, and credit organizations available for workers and *obshchiny*. In their words, the *obshchina* and the *artjel* represented a microcosm: the moral side of the common people, the collective voice of the commune, towards social justice and equality. The revolutionary goal was to be achieved through unrest and turmoil, by triggering the organization of insurgent forces, via revolts or strikes, and the increasing disorganization of the state by a better organized revolutionary movement.

In these years, a few *Narodniki*, like Alexandrovich Lopatin, fled abroad to avoid arrest. In Switzerland and within the First International, they supported Marx over Bakunin. However, Russian populism in these years could not be regarded as Marxist. Despite its initial loose organization and moralistic ethos, it rejected Herzen's romanticized view of the Russian peasantry, and supported the political propaganda for producers' associations and cooperatives, land collective nationalization and other forms of collective ownership embedded within the utopian socialist tradition (Mullin 2020). Marx became one of the main readings that the Russian populists used, for the history and economic classes they were holding with workers and peasants. The class struggle that is central in Marx was avoided (Mullin 2020), although Marx himself read about the *Narodniki* and admired their enthusiasm and optimism (Venturi 1972 [1952]).

RUSSIAN POPULISM AND RUSSIAN MARXISM

The challenges that the Russian populists met had to do with the possibilities of the democratization of the Russian state and society, as well as the prospects of pauperization and exploitation that the peasants were faced with by the advent of the capitalist mode of production in Russia. The wrenching effects of capitalism on Western proletarianized masses of former peasants, through the process that Marx (1990: 873) described as primary accumulation, became known, and the populists tried to develop a theory and a movement that would oppose the capitalist development in Russia, and would potentially bypass it as well.

The populists coined an approach to socialism that corresponded to the actualities of Russia, taking under serious concern the brute realities of capitalism affecting the peasant masses of the West. Simultaneously, they also maintained a rather romantic and utopian view of the Russian rural way of living, which they sought to preserve. In particular, the populists showed confidence in people's institutions such as the rural commune (*obshchina*) and the workers' cooperatives (*artjel*) which they saw as 'advantages of backwardness' (Gerschenkron 1973: 672). These institutions were perceived as containing the essence of a primitive form of socialism that could be maintained, instead of being sacrificed to the (supposed) laws of progress. To this regard, Marx, in his later work, appeared to be in conditional agreement with the

Narodniki (Shanin 2018). Marx became interested in Russia and even learned Russian to be able to study Russian texts and documents on the Russian socio-economic situation.

While Marx became familiar with Russia through the translation of Lopatin and the readings of those who fled to Switzerland and later joined the First International, himself and Engels were also introduced to the ideas and experience of Chernishevskij. Both within Russia and outside, there was the awareness that historically and geographically, the Russian situation was very much different from any of their Western counterparts. Yet, from March 1870, when Marx started to read Florevsky's work, up to the 1880s, they converged towards shared strategic planning through the weakening of the state and its seizure through turmoil and unrest (Mullin, 2020; Venturi 1972 [1952]).

Within the *Narodniki*, Marx was a primary reading during the 'going to the people' campaign. In due time, the development of different approaches to the organizing of unrest, and the support given to the strikes in the cities, gave way to the foundation of rather independent organizations. Nevertheless, the ideas of the *artjel* that emerged among workers on the model of the *obshchina* did not reflect the making of a socialist movement (Mullin 2020). Although Russia had already developed a growing industrial proletariat, it is at this time that an increasing interest and intellectual exchange between the Russian *Narodniki* and Marx and his writings advanced, with Marx evaluating the possibility of bypassing the capitalist stage through forms of collective ownership and solidarity as seen in the *obshchina* (Venturi 1972 [1952]). Through his correspondence with the Russian revolutionary Vera Zasluch, he argued that under certain conditions, rural communal life would be the source of social regeneration in the event of a successful revolution in Russia, avoiding passing through the primitive accumulation phase related to the advent of the capitalist mode of production (Shanin 2018: 17).

Yet, Marxism advanced differently in the West and in Russia. This occurred, as underlined, due to the different social conditions prevailing on the ground. While in the West, Marxism developed as an ideology against liberalism and was based on a strong, class-conscious labour movement, in Russia, it was developed by intellectuals, largely against the Tsarist regime (Pipes 1960: 317). Marxism in Russia grew parallel to populism, with Marxism providing a theoretical influence on the socio-economic analyses of the populists, and populism providing a source of experience, organization and tactics to the struggles against the conditions of the Tsarist autocracy. Richard Pipes outlines the existence of three distinct currents of Russian Marxism that unfolded during the late nineteenth century: (1) that associated with the thought of the legal Marxists, who welcomed economic liberalism and capitalism as a necessary phase of development towards socialism; (2) that connected with the thought of Plekhanov (who was based in Geneva) and his circle; and (3) that Marxism related with the deeds of conspiratorial groups within Russia.

Plekhanov, the so-called father of Russian Marxism, sought to apply the laws of economic development to the specificities of Russia, in order to unfold Russia's socialist potential in Marxist terms, while rejecting a Blanquist 'seizure of power' strategy advanced by conspiratorial populists like Tkachev. For Plekhanov too, though, a transition from feudalism to socialism was possible in Russia, where the peasant commune was not dissolved by feudalism, as was the case in the West. In the West, the peasant commune had disintegrated due to its struggle with feudalism, but this could not be the case for Russia. Plekhanov argued for the development of broader social alliances to overthrow autocracy, organized under a labour party for the acquisition of power of the socialists (Pipes 1960: 327). This position primarily implied an

emphasis on both political and social struggles. Additionally, Plekhanov's Marxism shifted the attention from the rural peasant to the urban worker.

The Russian populists, however, largely rejected the need for a political revolution, as this was perceived as something that could not resolve the social question. For this reason, it was dismissed as a bourgeois phase that Russia should bypass (Walicki 1969: 81). Additionally, and unlike Marxists, a class struggle stage was not emphasized by the populists. Instead, a general focus on 'the people' (while prioritizing the peasants) was maintained, upholding the belief that parts of the upper classes could also support the peasants' demands and populist cause (Mullin 2020: 40). A social revolution was the priority of the Russian populist movement, focusing on the economic transformation of society from its foundations. This goal resulted in the development of an 'apolitical'³ stance and an understanding of politics in a rather constraining way, as a mere bourgeois instrument of domination, while rejecting Western representative parliamentarism and liberal constitutionalism. Although constitutional parliamentarism was rejected, autocracy was not always disputed. Instead, when compared to liberal constitutional developments, autocracy (though in principle rejected) was seen by the legal populists to be less constrained by the serving of specific vested interests, as it did not allow the advancement of bourgeois interests in Russia. In this sense, populist branches could align with the Tsar, if he would develop radical reforms for the peasantry. While demanding deep reforms, Herzen thus conditionally supported the Tsar's modernization efforts in the late 1850s, resulting in the abolition of serfdom (Mullin 2020: 34; Walicki 2015: 258).

The social revolution envisioned by the populists was expected to overcome the Tsarist monarchy without the development of transitional forms of government. Democracy, in this sense too, had a rather social meaning and not a predominantly political one. The people would advance democratic consciousness and relevant social relations in order to facilitate the revolution. Either way, the political experiences of the populists forced some of them (like Chernishevsky), who were in principle opposing political struggles, to gradually embrace struggles for constitutional rights and political freedoms taking place in Russia, understanding their necessity for the development of the revolutionary cause. It should be noted that the apolitical stance focused more on withholding capitalism than attacking the state form, which is what the Russian anarchists were advocating for, through an equivalent apolitical stance. Chernishevsky, who held a Westernizing perspective overall, understood though that the success of a social revolution in Russia would be sustained only through a parallel social revolution in the West (Mullin 2020: 35). This way, the modernization processes that unfolded in the West would be shared with Russia, and Russia would be able to exit its underdeveloped state without passing through capitalism.

Moreover, Andrzej Walicki (1969) understood Russian populism as a movement of the masses that discards the intellectual authority of both those defending progress from 'objectivist' (e.g. scientific) points of view (who, often enough become apologists of capitalism) and of the professional revolutionaries and intelligentsia. In that sense, the Russian populists were defined by their rejection of scientific political theories that understood the passing to socialism in a deterministic sense, through the initial establishment of capitalism. Instead, the populists declared a more 'subjective' understanding of history and progress, associated with the specific social context of Russia, as well as proclaiming that it is the revolutionaries that should learn from the masses of the peasants, who are presumably aware of their true interests and needs, which are to guide the revolutionary process and set its goals.

Additionally, while from the outside there was the perception that Russia lacked sufficient manufactured products and a developed market, Plekhanov and Lenin pointed to the rapid economic and social progress from 1861 onwards. Beyond *kulaki*, a new peasant-proletariat class had emerged from the Emancipation Reform, pushing for the production of consumer goods and a dynamic market. This small-scale growing market signalled a disruption between the *Narodniki* and Marxism, as the *Narodniki* viewed this as a first step towards socialism, but for Russian Marxism, the still existing private ownership of all other means of production was understood to be leading towards capitalist exploitation, the very exploitation that some of the *Narodniki* had pointed to as the graveyard of civilizations only a few decades previously.

Although not unanimously in agreement, or fully consistent, such positions initially brought the populists in contrast with Marxists. Initially, Marx and Engels were suspicious of the Russian revolutionaries, rejecting their apolitical tactics, Panslavist aspirations and dismissing the view that a revolution was more probable to erupt in backward countries than in bourgeois ones. Nevertheless, Marx and Engels were also admiring the heroism and courage of the Russian revolutionaries during the 1880s, at a time when revolutionary movements were inexistent in Western and Central Europe (Mullin 2020: 42). Lenin, later, also understood Russian populism as an ideology and movement of small shareholders that resisted capitalist accumulation. Here Russian populism emerged as a phenomenon that was relevant to backward societies that lacked a bourgeois social structure. In Lenin's sense, 'populism was a broad current of Russian democratic thought which reflected the class standpoint of small producers, mainly peasants, willing to get rid of the remnants of serfdom, but, at the same time, endangered by the development of capitalism' (Walicki 1969: 12). Lenin (1969: 68) appreciated the organizational structure and struggles of *Zemlya i Volia* but resented its ideology as non-revolutionary because it failed to perceive the importance of the working class in Russia, where capitalism was rapidly advancing.

Indeed, from the 1870s onwards, the limited, if any, gains of terrorist acts convinced many Russian revolutionaries to move towards Marxism. This implied the advance of Plekhanov's understanding that capitalism had already arrived in Russia and was developing accordingly. Attention shifted towards the working class and its centrality in the struggle for the socialist cause (Mullin 2020: 42). Furthermore, Russian Marxists, like the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party at the beginning of the twentieth century, would assume that a possible Russian revolution would (at least initially) have a bourgeois-democratic character, understanding capitalism as the main force to undermine monarchy (Lewin 2016: 275). That being said, the revolution of 1905 demonstrated the limits of such an aspiration, turning Lenin towards the seeking of a different revolutionary strategy. The peasantry was placed at the centre of Lenin's attention (due to the limited advance of capitalism in Russia), while also focusing on the prospects of a European revolution. In this configuration, the prospects of a Russian revolution were seen as of secondary importance, due to the backward state of Russia overall (Lewin 2016: 277). Simultaneously, understanding that the political aspirations of Plekhanov were inapplicable to the realities of an autocratic and underdeveloped Russia, Russian Marxists were forced to rely on the populist organizational experience (Pipes 1960: 336). The Marxists, though, did not see anything inherently socialist in the peasant masses. A belief in socialism, in their view, would emerge through agitation, propaganda and political militancy. Nevertheless, the need for a tight professional organization of revolutionaries that was advanced by Lenin was first initiated by the populists as an effective way of conducting the revolution in Russia.

Overall, a symbiotic but tense relation evolved between Russian populist thought and the revolutionary strategy, and the equivalent Marxist ones. Russian Marxism, in particular, was strongly influenced by the practices of the populists, while the Russian populists were also influenced by the Marxist analyses. The stagnation of European revolutionary movements made the Russian populists a source of inspiration and reflection for the radical thinkers of the West. Further, the situated context of Russia proved the populist experience to be indispensable for the advance of revolutionary movements in the country, while Marxism brought a broader perspective in the understanding of the Russian socio-political context, from the lens of the proletarian experience and political and revolutionary strategies of more advanced countries.

ASSESSING RUSSIAN POPULISM

Russian populism has had an important impact in Russian radical politics, influencing the development of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russian political thought, and the Russian revolutionary organizations and events of the same era. Although a historical current that bears specific characteristics associated with the Russian politico-historical context of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, Russian populism also shares common features to other populist phenomena, both historical and contemporary, from across the world. At the same time, Russian populism has considerable differences from other populist movements and politics, past and contemporary. For such reasons, Taggart (2000: 58) argued that Russian populism ‘sits uneasily with other cases of populism’.

In principle, populists construct an identity of the people, which provides legitimacy for demands and strategies of social change (Katsambekis 2022). Such an identity construction is connected to social symptoms faced by society’s most oppressed strata. Reflecting on contemporary populist politics, scholars (De Cleen et al. 2018) agree that they are born within the socio-political and cultural context of globalization and the crisis of neoliberal capitalism. Populists from both the left and the right today articulate a political discourse of ‘the people’ versus ‘the elites’ (Stavrakakis 2019), which includes specific demands that challenge the legitimacy of ‘experts’ in public decision-making processes and stress the importance of popular sovereignty. Likewise, Russian populists emerged in the times when capitalist modernity was advancing in the world and in autocratic Russia as well. They articulated a discourse of discontent towards both the Tsarist monarchy and capitalism itself from a people’s point of view that delegitimized established authority and privilege. Furthermore, Russian populists challenged different ‘expert’ systems of their times, such as the Western-orientated intelligentsia, foregrounding the people’s assumed inherent goodness, knowledge and natural wisdom.

Hence, an idealist and essentialist, positive understanding of ‘the (Russian) people’, and their distinct qualities, is a prominent feature in Russian populist thought and socio-political aspirations, which can also be found in contemporary populist currents. Russian populism demonstrated a strong emphasis of the people, viewed as a source of knowledge and inspiration. Further, the populists’ efforts and energies were committed to the people’s emancipation and salvation. They were supposed to be guided by the inherent wisdom of the Russian people, and yet, the Russian populists discursively constructed a specific identity of the Russian people, which was more of an ideological edifice than anything else. Likewise, in their political discourse, populists today stress and develop different identity features of the people,

focusing on specific definitions of ‘the underdog’, disadvantaged social strata and groups that they claim to represent, often in essentialist ways. The contemporary populist left constructs the people in both broadly conceived national and class characteristics, focusing on forms of common politico-economic and social demands (Katsambekis Stavrakakis 2017; Kioupkiolis 2016: 111). In this sense, today’s left-wing populist discourse seems to share affinities to the ways that the Russian populists constructed the oppressed Russian people.

In the Russian populist context, the proclaimed adversary of the Russian people was monarchy and its institutions of privilege and property, the prospects of capitalist modernity for Russia – to a certain degree – and the Western-orientated liberal – and sometimes Marxist – intellectuals and politicians. Taking the peripherality of nineteenth-century Russia also into account, Russian populist theory developed in dialogue with the most radical political currents of the West and, despite its moralist and sometimes nostalgic features – associated with the essentialist construction of the Russian people and the focus on an idealized communal past – their ideas and practices strived for a revolutionary and emancipatory change, that would benefit the most disadvantaged segments of Russian society.

Additionally, Russian populism demonstrated important contradictions connected to the ways that populists themselves understood theory and politics (Taggart 2000: 56). In many ways, Russian populists produced theory that countered the need or the importance of political theory and ideology, substituting it with grassroots traditions and values, presumably found in Russian peasant life. Simultaneously, Russian populists demonstrated an anti-political stance, seeing politics as compromising the social struggle and the resolution of the social question. Despite such anti-theoretical and anti-political ambitions, however, Russian populists developed theories and political tactics as well, as they often had to create tactical alliances and function within the institutional confines of their historical contexts. Nevertheless, the Russian populist movement was principally revolutionary and socialist, whereas contemporary populists maintain a rather reformist stance towards the liberal democratic framework, operating within liberal democratic confines. The Russian populists strove for more genuine forms of democracy and inclusion of the disadvantaged, often departing from anarchist revolutionary ideas and practices, beyond the compromised liberal framework that they saw developing in the West. Contemporary populists, especially from the political right, may also demonstrate anti-theoretical and anti-political stances to discredit the liberal democratic establishment. Nevertheless, contemporary populists mainly function politically, participating in national elections and aiming to establish themselves in mainstream politics and even to participate in government through liberal democratic parliamentary means. Moving further to the far right, contemporary populist radical right-wing parties proclaim anti-political and anti-theoretical stances that are generally associated with regressive positions, often nostalgic to autocratic national legacies.

Despite its political and ideological influence, as a movement, Russian populism remained small and failed to establish a mass appeal. The Russian populists could not succeed in radicalizing the Russian people, and for this reason they often resorted to acts of terror. Their major impact was on the Russian revolutionary movement and Russian Marxist-Leninism, that learned from the populist movement’s failures and managed to develop more efficient organizational goals and strategies, that would lead to the victorious revolution of 1917 in Russia, against both monarchy and capitalism.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While in theory the *Narodniki* and Marxism took different approaches, this chapter seeks to indicate what they had in common and how they can be interpreted as a critical breeding ground for later developments that can also be associated with contemporary left populism. As such, while considering the fuse between *Narodnism* and Marxism, scholars express different views on the matter. For Belfer (1978: 302), ‘Marxist theory appeared to represent a total dissociation from the populist-Slavophil tradition of Russian revolutionism in its abandonment of the two sacred principles: a) the belief in Russia’s uniqueness (based on an admiration of the communal-rural nature of Russian society); and b) the belief in the immediacy of the revolution’. Others (Pipes 1960: 320; Walicki 1969: 133) advance a more nuanced view, where, besides rupture, osmosis between Marxism and populism is understood to have occurred while the Russian revolutionary movement was developing different tactics and understandings of Russian society and the revolutionary stakes.

The *Narodniki* themselves, eventually, further distanced themselves from both terrorism and from Marx. While Marx and Engels wrote that socialism would be the consequence of extreme capitalism, they pointed to Chernyshevskij. As Walicki (1969) writes, Russian populism was both the interpreter of Russian backwardness and a reaction to Western capitalism. In the Russian experience of the *obshchina* and *artjel*, one can view a different trajectory that moved beyond the focus on ideological and economic transformation and brought to the centre the solidarity of the masses’ experience and an ethically driven movement among the educated youth towards the people. With time came the awareness of the power held by the country’s political structures; the populists themselves came to recognize that their mission had to change and become more pragmatic. So, while they could converge on the shared enthusiasm towards the masses’ optimism and the commune, the Russian experience itself created an unavoidable distinction between the European and Russian situations.

The influence of Marx can be viewed in the populists’ understanding of Western capitalism, as Marxian ideas were deployed by different populists to develop a criticism of the liberal political economy, which addressed the horrors of capitalist accumulation (Pipes 1960: 322). Walicki argues that Marxian ideas were assimilated by the populists before *Capital* was published and translated into Russian. Nevertheless, their views on capitalism were not entirely Marxist, as they perceived capitalism to be a retrogressive process more than a progressive one (Walicki, 1969: 137), maintaining their rather romantic and utopian view of traditional and rural forms of living.

The populists thus developed an eclectic understanding of Marx that in some ways deepened their analysis, while dismissing the dimensions in Marx’s thought that seemed inconsistent, like Marx’s emphasis on the political struggle. In that sense, Russian populists cannot be viewed as full-blown Marxists. Their conviction that political reforms would advance capitalist development in Russia led them to interpret Marx in their own ways. Although Marx advocated for political struggle, the populists focused more on Marx’s denouncing of liberal hypocrisy and bourgeois democracy overall (Walicki 1969: 88). Indeed, after the abolition of serfdom, new forms of exploitation emerged which further weakened the position of the peasants, with a new agrarian capitalist class being on the rise (the Kulaks). This contributed to the idealization of the social basis of the Russian peasants (the *mir*) and its understanding as pre- or proto-socialist.

NOTES

1. The *obshchina* literally translates as ‘commune’. They were the peasants’ village communities and were later interpreted as the focus of the future socialist society. More Slavophile views regarded them as the representation of Russian solidarity and unity.
2. The *artjel* is a term that refers to cooperative associations of artisans, craftsmen and light industry workers that developed in Russia during the nineteenth century, related to common forms of ownership and egalitarian structures.
3. ‘Apolitical’ refers to the non-ideological, almost religious and pan-economic idea of socialism supported by Marx and the Marxist tradition later, that Franco Venturi (1972 [1952]) interpreted as surpassed by historical events.

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6. Populism and anti-populism in the United States

Charles Postel

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1880s and 1890s, a large-scale and powerful farmer-labour coalition forged the People's Party, widely known by its nickname the Populist Party. The nickname, however, often leads to a misunderstanding that populism was an expression of a type of American exceptionalism when, in both style and substance, United States (US) populism resembled the labour and farmer politics and the evolutionary social democracy found elsewhere in the late nineteenth-century capitalist world. The Populist Party represented a coalition of farm and labour organizations that combined in pursuit of interest-based or class-based politics, including the public ownership of railroads, the graduated income tax, flexible currency and the eight-hour workday. The populist vision of a 'cooperative commonwealth' – combining state ownership with cooperative enterprise and labour organization – clashed forcefully against the prevailing political economy of corporate *laissez faire*.

The People's Party was the most successful third party since prior to the Civil War, and for a moment presented a viable alternative path for American development. Populism marked the cresting of social movements embracing millions of wage earners, farmers and women seeking social, economic and political equality. If the political left is defined by its commitment to more equal relationships between human beings (Bobbio 1996), then US populism, despite its mixed record regarding race, was mainly a movement of the left. In terms of organizational strength, populism collapsed before the turn of the century; however, its legacy lived on within a broad current of farmer-labour, social-democratic and progressive politics.

The rise of the populist movement stirred panic among the prosperous and the powerful. The defenders of the pro-corporate status quo employed bribery, ballot-stuffing and, in places, white supremacist terror to defeat the populists at the polls. They also adapted populist methods to the cause of anti-populism, that is, to re-enforce the hierarchies of power. Whereas historians often trace the emergence of modern conservatism to business opposition to the New Deal of the 1930s (Phillips-Fein 2009), the reaction against populism in the 1890s was a sign of what was to come. Here it should be noted that analysis of this history requires taking account of the uses and abuses of the term *populism*, which has acquired multiple and often contradictory meanings, differentiated by region and even academic field. In the US context, however, the populist farmer-labour movement of the late nineteenth century is the starting point of the meanings of the concept (Postel 2019b).

POPULIST ORIGINS

Populism emerged from the egalitarian ferment in the aftermath of the Civil War. The movement of 4 million African Americans from enslavement to freedom placed the Black struggle for equality in the centre of political life, including the adoption of three major amendments to the US Constitution. At the same time, farmers, labourers, women and other populations made their own claims for equality – politically, socially and in economic life. In the process they formed combinations and organizations with national scope and unprecedented strength (Postel 2019a: 8–13).

Farmers played a central role in post-Civil War organization building. Despite the rapid growth of industry, more Americans worked in agriculture than any other field of work. The number of farms nearly tripled between 1860 and 1890, as the violent expropriation of Native American lands and the construction of railroads into new territories allowed for the rapid expansion of the agricultural population. The class nature of this population was varied and multi-faceted. Late twentieth-century social historians sought the roots of populism in a farming class made of a traditional self-sustaining yeomanry resisting the encroachments of commercial society (Hahn 1985). This was in contrast to the mid-century historian Richard Hofstadter, who would famously describe the farmers of this era as ‘harassed little country businessmen’. A small number of them owned large cotton plantations and bonanza farms, but the vast majority were small and middling commercial farmers, often land-poor and deep in debt. Many of them hired wage labour – although that often meant employing one or two field hands or domestic workers. Hofstadter would also describe these business-like farmers as ‘delusional’ when they aligned themselves with labour (Hofstadter 1955: 12–22). But given the sharp cleavage between manual and mental labour, farmers’ callused hands and sunburned necks placed them within the category of labour, with the social and cultural consequences that entailed. Moreover, during slack seasons and hard times, farmers often worked for wages in nearby coal mines and other work sites.

The organization of the nation’s farmers began in earnest with the formation of the Patrons of Husbandry or the National Grange. Initiated in 1867 by a group of federal employees in Washington, by the mid-1870s the Grange had organized some 860,000 members across the Midwest, West and South. The Grange pursued the equality of farmers in the national economy and political life. They also championed equality for women, who enjoyed nominally equal rights within its ranks. Although overlooked in explanations for the defeat of reconstruction, the Grange formed a critical voting bloc against reconstruction, seeing federal protections of the formerly enslaved people as violations of the equal rights of Southern (white) planters and farmers. Meanwhile, the Grange put anti-monopoly on the national agenda. Granger anti-monopoly has been misunderstood as a desire to protect small-scale and local enterprise from the encroachments of large-scale corporate and governmental institutions. The Grange, however, set up cooperative stores to drive out the local merchants, built large-scale trading companies to centralize trans-Atlantic trade and pushed for state regulations to rationalize railroads and grain storage. The economic crisis of the mid-1870s took a heavy toll on the Grange, and a number of its organizers joined the Greenback-Labor Party, a farmer-labour party formed in 1874 and an important predecessor of the People’s Party (Postel 2019a: 17–69).

By the late 1880s, embracing new organizations, farmers had mobilized on an unprecedented scale. The biggest and most powerful of these was the National Farmers’ Alliance and Industrial Union, with its origins among the cotton farmers of central Texas. The Farmers’

Alliance, with over a million members from coast to coast, borrowed much from the Grange; however, it also made several innovations. In the face of the high cost of credit and the dearth of currency in farm country, the Farmers' Alliance came up with a plan to construct thousands of federal warehouses to store crops upon which farmers could receive cheap credit. Known as the 'sub-treasury', this plan represented an aggressive demand for federal intervention on behalf of the cash-poor and debt-strapped farmer. With the watchwords 'knowledge is power', the Farmers' Alliance also undertook a vast educational campaign on topics of concern, from agricultural science to political economy. The campaign offered farm women unique opportunities as editors, lecturers and educators within the Farmers' Alliance publishing networks, lecturing circuits, lending libraries and book clubs. When it came to matters of race, the Farmers' Alliance was a 'whites only' organization, and accepted the dogmas of white supremacy. At the same time, it set up a working relationship with the Colored Farmers' Alliance, which organized Black farmers across the South. This relationship was unequal, with the white Alliance appointing key officers of the Colored Alliance. The practical ties ruptured when the Colored Farmers' Alliance supported a strike of Black cotton pickers in the summer of 1891. Nonetheless, the political potential of the unification of the two alliances was not lost in the push to found the People's Party (Postel 2007).

For the Farmers' Alliance, the prospect of a political combination with the Knights of Labor (K of L) held great potential, as well. The K of L started out in 1869 as a secret society among Philadelphia garment cutters, but by the mid-1880s had become the most powerful workers' organization in the country's history. The K of L organized working-class communities and entire industries, with its greatest success among railroad workers and coal miners. The K of L organized skilled and unskilled, male and female, urban as well as rural workers. It also reached across the lines of ethnicity and race, although it adopted the xenophobic hostility to Chinese workers that was common within the labour movement. In the South, laundry women, farm labourers and other sections of the Black poor organized K of L lodges. In 1886, Friedrich Engels greeted the K of L as 'the first national organization created by the American working class as a whole' (Engels 1987 [1886]). By the end of the decade, the K of L had suffered severe repression, and looked to a political combination with the Farmers' Alliance as a safe harbour. Indeed, the two movements had similar organizational systems, had close ties in railway and mining towns, made similar efforts to wield state power as a counterforce to corporate power and shared ideas about a future 'cooperative commonwealth' (Postel 2019a: 171–274).

THE POPULIST PARTY

The People's Party, or Populist Party, was formed at 'industrial conferences' held in Cincinnati (May 1891) and St Louis (February 1892), with the Farmers' Alliance and allied farmers' groups and the K of L playing key roles. The presence of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union indicated the hope that women's rights advocates placed with the new party. The part played by Nationalist Clubs (inspired by the evolutionary socialism of Edward Bellamy), and Single Tax Leagues (advocating Henry George's uniform or single tax on land as a remedy for land monopoly and economic inequality) accentuated the egalitarian and social democratic features of the new political formation. Prior to this point, the Farmers' Alliance and most of the other associations had adopted an official position of non-partisanship. The corporate grip

on the established parties, however, pushed the farmer and labour groups towards political independence, and what they hoped would be a non-partisan party, or 'Congress of Industrial Organizations'. Unlike an ordinary political party that mainly functioned as a machine to turn out voters and raise candidates to office, the Populist Party would be a unification of farmer and labour organizations for the pursuit of their interests (McMath 1993: 143–179).

On 4 July 1892, the People's Party held its first national convention in Omaha, Nebraska, and hammered out its programme. The preamble to the 'Omaha Platform' warned that corporate power posed a danger to American freedom and set forth the key demands of the farmer and labour movement. The platform called for the public ownership of railroads and telecommunications, expressing that: 'We believe that the power of government – in other words of the people – should be expanded (as in the case of the postal service) as rapidly and as far as the good sense of an intelligent people and the teaching of experience shall justify' (People's Party 1931 [1892]). To topple the gold standard that impoverished most of the country for the benefit of Wall Street, the Omaha Platform called for the federal treasury to expand paper currency and to mint more silver. It also called for a graduated income tax to be paid by the wealthy. The platform endorsed the 'sub-treasury plan' of federal warehouses and farm credits. The platform's 'expression of sentiments' demanded enforcement of the eight-hour day laws on government work and the prohibition of private police to crush labour strikes. Finally, to combat corporate political corruption, the platform proposed civil service reform, the secret ballot, the direct election of US senators and legislation by way of the initiative and referendum.

With its publishing network and lecture circuits, the Populist Party relied on the methods of mass education – to friends and enemies, it was known as a 'reading party', and a 'writing and talking party'.¹ Party leaders included lecturers such as Mary Elizabeth Lease and James 'Cyclone' Davis, editors such as Henry Vincent and Annie Diggs, Farmers' Alliance officers such as Leonidas Polk and Marion Butler, labour organizers such as John McBride of the United Mine Workers and Eugene Victor Debs of the American Railway Union, along with politicians such as Thomas Watson and James B. Weaver. Many populist cadre, men and women, laboured on farmsteads and at workshops, and within its ranks populism also had more than its share of non-conformists when it came to matters of custom and social norms, giving the movement a radically humanist and egalitarian élan.

On the electoral front, the People's Party proved to be the most effective third party since the rise of the Republican Party prior to the Civil War. In 1892, its presidential candidate, James Weaver, received more than a million votes. Some 50 Populists, including senators from Idaho, Kansas, Nebraska, North Carolina and South Dakota, served in the US Congress, where they championed the 'Omaha Platform'. In several Great Plains states, the Populists controlled the state government, and in Texas, California and elsewhere the Populist bloc held the balance of power in the state legislatures. They pursued electoral reform and other measures against corporate corruption, and backed the expansion of public higher education by way of the land grant colleges. They also worked with women's organizations to protect the rights of women and girls regarding age of consent, divorce and suffrage laws. In 1894, a Populist administration in Colorado helped make that state the first in the nation to allow women the ballot in federal elections (Edwards 1997: 111–32). Meanwhile, Populists pursued municipal and judicial reform, serving in local office as mayors, judges, sheriffs and city council members.

In the context of the ethno-religious hatreds of the late nineteenth century, populist politics tended to eschew the anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic bigotry that coursed through American political life. One historian fittingly described them as ‘the tolerant Populists’, given their accepting attitudes towards religious minorities and (most) immigrants (Nugent 1963). Many populist farmers grew up in Anglo-American and Protestant households, and embraced a political project with labour populists, who more often than not came from Irish Catholic and other immigrant backgrounds. In their critiques of Wall Street banks, populist newspapers at times employed anti-Semitic images of Shylock, but welcomed actual Jews into their coalition. Edward Rosewater, the most prominent Jewish citizen of Nebraska, supported the Populist candidate against a Republican candidate for governor, because the Republican was supported by the xenophobic bigots of the American Protective Association. In San Francisco, a Jewish Populist, Adolph Sutro, gained the mayor’s office. Most Populists embraced the xenophobic Chinese exclusion laws, although their ranks were divided on the question. The Populists’ tolerant humanism reflected a spiritual world that tended towards religious liberalism and heterodoxy – with more of their share of Christian socialists, spiritualists, Swedenborgians, Theosophists and freethinkers (Postel 2016a).

In the South, the Populists navigated a treacherous political landscape. Since the defeat of reconstruction, the violent destruction of the Republican Party allowed the Democratic Party of white supremacy a monopoly of power. That monopoly cracked when the Populists broke from the Democrats, opening a fissure within the white supremacist vote. Historians have overstated the extent to which populism represented a biracial unification of working people. Nonetheless, for African Americans, who still clung precariously to their voting rights, this fissure provided a political opening. A small number of Black Populists, such as the orator John Rayner of Texas, joined the ranks of the new party, while the competition between Populists and Democrats gave Blacks leverage to demand voting protections, school funding and the right to serve on juries. The People’s Party walked a tightrope, making promises to Black voters while fending off accusations of race treason made by Democrats. Meanwhile, where Republicans maintained a significant presence, opportunities emerged for electoral alliances or so-called ‘fusion’ politics between mainly white Populists and mainly Black Republicans. The power of such Populist–Republican ‘fusion’ was demonstrated in the 1894 elections in North Carolina, with the ‘fusionists’ gaining a majority in the state legislature and sending Marion Butler, the national president of the Farmers’ Alliance and the chair of the national People’s Party, to the US Senate. North Carolina’s ‘fusion’ government-funded education for white and Black pupils granted debt relief for the white and Black poor, and enacted electoral reforms to protect ‘a free ballot and fair count’ (Beckel 2011: 155–204).

In much of the rest of the country, as an insurgent third party, the People’s Party faced the structural obstacle of a winner-take-all political system. They made their strongest showing at the polls in the Midwestern and Western states where Republicans held power. In these states, however, the Democrats often ran on reforms to attract farmer and labour votes. This meant that in California, for example, where in 1894 the Populists won a quarter of the ballots, the result was to split the reform vote and give the pro-corporate Republicans a supermajority in the legislature. The Populists learned that ‘fusion’ agreements with Democrats were a political necessity that led to many of their electoral successes. The question of ‘fusion’ sharply divided the Populists in the 1896 presidential elections. William Jennings Bryan, the Democratic candidate from Nebraska, ran on silver inflation, the graduated income tax and other popular reforms. The Populists’ ‘middle-of-the-road’ faction argued that if the People’s Party failed

to field a candidate, their programme would be watered down and absorbed by the established parties. Some scholars have viewed the 'middle-of-the-road' Populists as the radical wing of the movement. The 'fusionist' faction, however, included no fewer radical Populists, who countered with the simple logic that if the party did field a candidate, a divided reform vote would hand victory to William McKinley and the pro-corporate Republicans. As it turned out, the Populists did support Bryan, who, nevertheless, lost to McKinley (Postel 2007: 269–289).

The People's Party suffered fatal wounds from the debacle of the 1896 election. As a current within American politics, however, populism not only survived but gained strength in the new century. Many populists found a political home in the farmer-labour or progressive wings of the Democratic or Republican Party. Others followed Eugene V. Debs into the newly formed Socialist Party, with Socialist constituencies taking root in Oklahoma and other former Populist strongholds. In the early 1910s, farmer-labour and social-democratic politics within the broader Progressive movement led to the realization of key Populist goals, albeit often in curtailed form. This included the Sixteenth Amendment allowing for the graduated income tax, the Federal Reserve Act regulating banking and providing for a more elastic currency and the Federal Trade Commission. The Seventeenth Amendment put the selection of US senators in the hands of voters, and many states adopted the referendum and other 'direct democracy' measures. In 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment expanded suffrage to women, an egalitarian reform driven in much of the country by farmer-labour constituencies. Populist policies such as federal farm credit, corporate regulations, the eight-hour work day and workers' rights to organize a union also influenced popular responses to the Great Depression and Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. At the end of the Second World War, drawing on a principle that the Populists had pushed into national political life 50 years earlier, Congress debated a Full Employment bill that would make the right to employment a universal right. In the twenty-first century, the efforts of senators such as Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren for redistributive taxes on wealth, and for public ownership of vital industries (including the old Populist proposal for post office savings banks), suggests that the egalitarian and social-democratic politics that first took shape in the Populist movement of the 1890s remained a potent force (Sanders 1999).

ANTI-POPULISM

In the late nineteenth century, witnessing the emergence of the populist movement, rich and well-to-do Americans were seized by panic. Corporate executives, merchants, lawyers and professors viewed the independent political mobilization of dirt farmers and manual labourers as an existential threat. They did their best to dismiss the Populists from the high altitude of upper-class condescension; the Populists, they assured themselves, were ignorant, backward and primitive, and their movement had no place in a modern civilization. Such assurances, however, could not hide their sense of terror, a sense that populism threatened nothing less than communism, the destruction of private property and of society itself. Defenders of the status quo argued that society must give a forceful response. In 1896, Theodore Roosevelt, who at the time served as a New York City police commissioner, viewed the Populist insurgency as 'anarchy' and 'an attack on civilization; an appeal to the torch'. The future president suggested that the appropriate solution was to line the movement's leaders 'against a wall to be shot'. No doubt, many upper-class New Yorkers held similarly violent opinions. Anti-populist

hatreds, however, were not confined to the big cities, nor to railroad executives or coal mine operators. In small and rural towns, dealers, shopkeepers, lawyers and political operators accurately understood that populism threatened their way of life (Postel 2016b).

Class panic mixed with race panic. Many white Southerners viewed the self-organization of African American labourers into the K of L and other labour organizations as a portent of a Black revolt, an extraordinary danger to be met with extraordinary violence. Even under white supervision, the Colored Farmers' Alliance was perceived as a menace, a perception confirmed with the aborted cotton pickers' strike in the late summer of 1891, when white lynch mobs in Arkansas murdered 15 strikers. Meanwhile, the Populist Party, by opening cracks in the political walls of white supremacy, rekindled white nightmares of so-called 'Negro rule', a term that many white Southerners attached to post-Civil War biracial governance in which Blacks took part as citizens. This nightmare was brought to life by the success of Populist-Republican 'fusion' in North Carolina. To regain power, the Democratic Party organized a 'white supremacy campaign' of intimidation and violence, culminating in November 1898 with an insurrection against the Populist-Republican administration in Wilmington, North Carolina. Armed white men burned down the offices of a Black newspaper, murdered more than 30 people and forced the leaders of the city's fusion government to flee for their lives (Zucchini 2020). In North Carolina and across the South, Democrats demonstrated the political rewards offered by white supremacist fear-mongering and demagoguery. They were also more convinced than ever of the need to strip Blacks of the franchise, because as long as they had the ballot, the danger would persist of Black voters making use of the competition between white factions. Under the false pretence of addressing 'voter fraud', white Democrats, with the complicity of some white Populists, enacted poll taxes and literacy tests to disfranchise Black voters across the South (Kousser 1974: 51–60).

Meanwhile, corporate, political and academic elites forged a conservative ideological system to confront and defeat the populist challenge. At the heart of anti-populist thought lay so-called *laissez-faire* economics. As famously articulated by Yale sociology professor William Graham Sumner, the demands of farmer-labour reform – from railroad regulation to the progressive income tax, from limits on the hours of work to restricting child labour – violated the natural and immutable laws of economics (Sumner 1883). Sumner built his arguments along the lines of the classical liberal theory of individual liberty, but in practice his *laissez-faire* doctrine failed to take into account the governmental interventions on behalf of corporations and other capitalists that played such a decisive role in the US political economy: railroad subsidies, bank charters, industrial tariffs and strike breaking, all of which Sumner accepted (apart from his qualms about the tariff). In practice, the key individuals whose liberty Sumner championed were not living human beings, but banking, railroad and industrial corporations, which were emerging at the time as the 'master institution of American life' (Lustig 1982: 90–97). During the populist years, the Supreme Court deemed corporations to be 'persons' with constitutional rights, struck down railroad regulations and graduated income taxes and condemned Eugene V. Debs to prison on the grounds that his railroad union violated *laissez-faire* principles.

Anti-populism, however, had other weapons besides lynch mobs and state repression; it quickly learned to accommodate, even to mimic, its political adversary. This was apparent in the 1896 presidential election between the Republican, William McKinley, and the Democratic-Populist fusion candidate, Bryan. The Republican stood for Wall Street's gold standard, regressive tariffs and corporate *laissez faire*, whereas Bryan campaigned for soft money (minting silver), the progressive income tax and labour reforms. Mark Hanna, the coal

and steel industrialist who managed McKinley's campaign, attacked the 'communistic spirit' animating Bryan's farmer and labour supporters. Yet, Hanna advertised his pro-Wall Street agenda as a labour agenda, a defence of 'honest wages for honest work'. Protective tariffs mostly benefited the likes of Hanna and his fellow industrialists, but in the campaign, Hanna promised miners and labourers a 'full dinner pail'. At the same time, Hanna mimicked Populist methods. Seeing how the Populists employed the cheap educational literature, Republicans flooded the field with educational materials. Observers described how the 1896 election became 'a search for economic and political truth' and 'a campaign of study and analysis' (Jones 1964: 332). Bolstered by corporate cash and powers of coercion, the anti-populists won that contest.

In the aftermath of the 1896 election, both the Republican and Democratic Parties absorbed Populist ideas and constituencies. Former Populists organized farmer-labour blocs within the established parties. At the same time, some conservatives within these parties understood that coopting Populist ideas was a means to safeguard their reactionary agenda. In 1912, this understanding led Theodore Roosevelt to split the Republican Party and form the 'Bull Moose' Progressive Party, whose programme lifted generously from the old Populist proposals. Eugene V. Debs, the former Populist and Socialist Party candidate at the time, noted the irony, observing that Roosevelt 'advocates doctrines which but a few years ago he denounced as anarchy and treason'. To such charges of inconsistency, Roosevelt simply replied that such accommodation was necessary to defeat more radical alternatives (Fleehinger 2003: 177–178). This conservative impulse led to an analytical quandary: were Progressive Era reforms a legacy of populism and the exertions of the farmer-labour 'periphery' (Sanders 1999)? Or did these reforms only mark, as a New Left historian put it, 'the triumph of conservatism' (Kolko 1963)? The role of white supremacy further compounds the analytical quandary. In the South (and not only in the South), the Democratic Party similarly absorbed former Populist ideas and constituencies, and it did so to re-enforce the regime of white supremacy. Thus, the Virginia-born president Woodrow Wilson, who put his signature on great reforms of the Progressive Era, was also a racial bigot and an architect of American apartheid.

Despite the ambiguities and complexities, prior to the Second World War, historians accepted that the Populist legacy formed a broad current of farmer-labour, progressive and left-wing politics. Much of their scholarship echoed Frederick Jackson Turner's elite condescension towards Populist 'primitives', yet at the same time, as with Turner, acknowledged populism's contribution to making a more democratic and egalitarian society (Turner 1893: 32). That assessment changed in the early days of the Cold War, when much of US social science was dedicated to removing the right and left as categories of analysis in favour of the notion of liberal consensus. In that light, scholars saw populism as the taproot of American xenophobia, anti-Semitism and intolerance (Ferkiss 1957). Hofstadter's innovation was to claim that populism had 'sourred', or had 'shape shifted' from left to right, re-emerging in the 1950s in the form of the anti-communist witch hunts of McCarthyism (Hofstadter 1955). Walter Nugent, Michael Rogin, C. Vann Woodward and other scholars pushed back, demonstrating that this 'shape shifting' never happened, that McCarthyism had its roots in conservative politics, not populism, and this assessment was sustained by countless historians working deep in the archives (Nugent 1963; Rogin 1967; Woodward 1960). Some new left historians saw in the Populist movement a lost possibility for a radical democratic alternative to modern bureaucratic society. In some cases, however, this also involved the idea that populism represented a pre-modern mode of life defying the march of commerce and progress (Lasch 1991:

168–225). Twenty-first-century scholarship, however, pushed back, holding that the Populists were modern people, imbedded in commercial society and committed to a more egalitarian and social-democratic (Postel 2007) or liberal, in the current American sense of the word, modernity (Cantrell 2020).

Some three generations of historians built a multi-dimensional body of scholarship that left behind the Hofstadter thesis as the early Cold War relic that it was. Nonetheless, the shape-shifting Populist menace continued to hold the imagination of political scientists, social theorists and journalists.² The consequences of this were put on display with the rise of right-wing ethno-cultural nationalist politics in the twenty-first century. From Austria to India, from Hungary to Brazil, from Italy to the US, right-wing movements with intolerant, xenophobic and nationalist agendas made aggressive claims on political power. Some of these movements had roots in the fascist parties of the interwar years; some were connected to militarist and authoritarian factions; and all of them self-identified as conservative movements of the political right. Yet, the pundit class decided to classify these movements with the term *populism*. This choice allowed journalists and social scientists to appear above the ideological fray, and to cling to old nostrums about consensus politics. It also gave both the pundits and their audiences a sense of condescension, an assurance of moral superiority over the crude politics of the lower orders. And then there was the novelty of the word *populism*, used to attract clicks and book sales. For these and other reasons, the global phenomena of right-wing reaction were painted with the *populist* brush. Doing so produced extraordinary ironies, especially in the US context, where it turned populism and anti-populism on their head.

Across the twentieth century, the conservative right wing remained a force in American life. In that sense, there was nothing new with the rise of the Tea Party movement in the first years of the Obama presidency, or with the rise of Donald Trump. Yet, the question remains, what accounted for the new political potency of conservative reactionaries? How did they come to control so many levers of power in the 2010s and early 2020s? Many pundits and social scientists found the source of this political strength in neoliberalism and the resulting immiseration and inequality. Indeed, out of this analytical framework, the notion emerged that this reactionary nationalist resurgence was a populist manifestation (Judis 2016). Of course, the US went through other periods of immiseration and inequity, with no comparable political results. Moreover, a strong case could be made that white nationalism and its attendant hatreds ran stronger in US life in the twentieth century than in the twenty-first. Here, however, lies a key distinction. The Ku Klux Klan had a national membership in the millions in the 1920s, but its politics of white supremacy and xenophobia were equally present in the Democratic and Republican Parties. The same held for the Liberty League in the 1930s and the America First Committee in the early 1940s, with neither Republicans nor Democrats having a monopoly of reactionary business leaders or pro-fascist anti-Semites in their midst. This institutional reality shifted in the wake of the civil rights revolution, the dismantling of much of the trade union movement and other developments. By the time of the Obama presidency, reactionaries hostile to multi-racial democracy, with few exceptions, had gathered under the single Republican tent. This party resorting mattered, as white nationalist and accompanying right-wing constituencies now had a controlling bloc in one of the two major political parties in a winner-takes-all election system, a dynamic that propelled them to power.

The twenty-first-century right wing aligned in extraordinary ways with the anti-populism of the past. The Tea Party cries to ‘take back our country’ from Obama, the usurper and tyrant, echoed the white supremacy campaign against Populist-Republican ‘fusion’; the attempted

coup of 6 January 2021 carried the same spirit as the 1898 Wilmington insurrection; and weaponizing lies about 'voter fraud' to disfranchise Black voters mirrored the efforts of the anti-populist Democrats of the 1890s. Meanwhile, Trump's nativism was cut from the same cloth as another New York millionaire, Madison Grant, a friend of Theodore Roosevelt, whose virulent xenophobic and anti-Semitic race theories became an essential strain of conservative thought. Twenty-first-century reactionaries also resurrected the *laissez-faire* dogma of corporate liberalism, echoing the arguments of William Graham Sumner and other anti-populist doctrinaires. In their state conventions, Republicans adopted explicitly anti-populist platforms, calling for abolishing the graduated income tax, privatizing Social Security, returning to the gold standard and dismantling the Federal Reserve (and the rest of the regulatory regime over corporations), while eliminating workers' rights to unionize in all but name.³ For its part, the Trump administration, led by corporate plutocrats and military generals, adopted the protective tariff as its policy of choice. The Trump tariffs served the same purpose as the McKinley tariffs did: fanning the flames of nationalism; providing corporate handouts paid for by regressive taxation; and adopting the posture of standing up for 'hard-working Americans'. Anti-populism was alive and well in Trump's America.

CONCLUSION

In 1906, the German sociologist Werner Sombart posed the question: 'Why is there no socialism in the United States' (Sombart 1976 [1906])? His query focused on the lack of a mass-based labour or social-democratic party as present in much of the capitalist world at the time. Looking forward, the timing of Sombart's question was a little off, as the Socialist Party was rapidly gaining strength, only to face crushing repression for its anti-war position during the First World War. But looking backward, Sombart failed to recognize the People's Party of the 1890s as a mass-based, farmer-labour party. What is more, the collapse of the People's Party sent farmer-labour and social-democratic constituencies into the Democratic and Republican Parties, as well as the newly formed Socialist Party. This populist legacy shaped egalitarian and anti-corporate politics over the course of the twentieth century and beyond.

To weigh the impact of populism on US historical development, however, it is also necessary to take into account the counterforces that mobilized to defeat populism. The post-Civil War egalitarian wave that crested with the populist movement provoked a profound response from the defenders of the status quo. Taking note of the 'equalizing, not to say leveling, tendency of the age', the writer Charles Dudley Warner cautioned that 'the dogma of equality' threatened to 'obliterate' the natural and necessary differences between classes, sexes and races (Warner 1880). Such was the reactionary spirit that animated a countermovement to protect the power and privileges embedded in the country's racial, gender and class hierarchies. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, an anti-populist reaction took political, social and ideological shape, defining the contours of right-wing politics for generations to come. Indeed, in the first decades of the twenty-first century, the legacy of anti-populism proved its staying power with the rise of the right-wing Tea Party and Donald Trump.

Much of this history has been shrouded in mystery. This has been mainly the doing of journalists and political theorists who have resuscitated the Cold War-era notion of the Populist movement of the 1890s as an ideologically shape-shifting menace, and the tap-root of ethno-cultural nationalism and authoritarianism. In so doing, they have twisted the realities of

populism and anti-populism beyond recognition, and scrubbed the historical division between the left and the right from the political scene. Remove the shroud, however, and there flows a broad and powerful egalitarian and social-democratic current coursing through US society, as well as a countercurrent, a dynamic and adaptive conservative form of political reaction.

NOTES

1. *St Louis Globe-Democrat*, cited in *Caucasian*, 1 December 1892.
2. In a variation that followed the cultural or linguistic turn, populism was also presented as a ‘mode of persuasion’ (Kazin 1995) or ‘thin-centered ideology’ (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 19) shared across ideological divides. These concepts, however, had less to do with the Populist movement and more to do with the language of popular politics under the conditions of broad suffrage.
3. With the rise of Trump, the Republican Party stopped issuing a platform, however, the state organizations adopted platforms in the full reactionary, anti-populist mode. See the 2022 Texas Republican Platform: <https://texasgop.org/2022platform/>.

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7. Peronism and its legacy

Paula Biglieri

INTRODUCTION

When did everything begin? Some say that it all began when Colonel Juan Domingo Perón (later promoted to General) took over as head of the National Department of Labour of the new military government in 1943; others say that it was in 1944 when Perón met the young drama actress Eva Duarte; others claim it was on 17 October 1945 when an unprecedented mobilization of the underdog took to the streets to protest against the arrest of the Colonel, who was imprisoned after being forced to resign. In any case, all these moments became foundational milestones in the history of Peronism. The first moment involved the novelty of a military man who rose to prominence from a hitherto lesser state unit by developing a pro-labour policy. The second, the love match that sealed the political leadership of the emerging populist movement. And the mobilization on 17 October 1945, which was categorized as a major event due to the effects it generated, triggered a change in the broader socio-political space that still reverberates today.

This latter mobilization went far beyond the expected forms of political protest of that time and, hence, exhibited all the features (attraction and repulsion) that temporal cuts possess when they put into question sedimented practices. It began thanks to the organization of grassroots trade union delegates and activists. Since early in the morning workers abandoned their jobs to join demonstrators' columns that, either by foot or by public transport, were growing whilst heading towards downtown Buenos Aires from different industrial areas and working-class neighbourhoods. By the evening, different columns arriving from diverse directions had filled Plaza de Mayo (the square on which Government House is located), with demonstrators holding one basic demand: 'Free Perón'. The military president, General Edelmiro Farrell, surprised by the situation, summoned Perón. At around 11 p.m. Perón emerged on the balcony of Government House to address the multitude, which burst into applause and cheers, crowning the festive character the demonstration had mostly had throughout the day. The mobilization had not only achieved its aim, but had also provoked immediate contiguous developments: it secured general elections for the following February and launched Perón's presidential candidacy. But the mobilization also generated repulsion and intimidation for many. Fundamentally, for those who were comfortably positioned in the established order and witnessed how their positions were disturbed by the irruption of a radical otherness that they started to call 'little black heads', 'shirtless' or 'greasy'.

The date of 17 October signalled the emergence of a new political subjectivity: the people, in its relation to a leadership. The show of force inscribed and made the underdog visible – now becoming 'a people' – as part of the communitarian space. It also inaugurated a political practice: massive mobilizations in which the leader would address the people, as a *mise-en-scène* of the people enacting popular sovereignty to assert political strength. And it also determined the antagonistic dichotomization of the social space into two registers of enunciation: the people and the oligarchy (an applicable name for 'those above'). It was a response to 'those above'

who vetoed and imprisoned Perón rejecting what they considered unacceptable policies. Peronism was born through the inscription of this tension and it had come to stay: the Peronist/anti-Peronist division was established as the main political mark that structured Argentinean politics, elevating populism to a significant feature of the country's political culture.

The argumentative strategy followed in this chapter is the following: first, to introduce the main features of historical Peronism in order to establish how it became a persistent trace; second, to describe 'the others of Peronism' to analyse how they also reproduce and reinforce the dichotomous division of social space by forming the anti-populist field; and third, to portray the different variations of Peronism throughout its history, to understand that it has never been identical to itself as it is always incorporating different (novel) demands. Kirchnerism, the last version of Peronism, will be analysed as an example indicating how the people of Peronism is never constituted as a homogeneous field, but always involves an articulation of differences.

PERONISM, A PERSISTENT TRACE

Perón won the presidential election in 1946 with 52 per cent of the vote and was re-elected with 62 per cent in 1951, ruling until the military coup which overthrew his second government in 1955. During the two Peronist terms in office, a whole series of institutions were introduced, generating an expansion of rights that provoked a transformation in the status quo. One of the most significant consequences was the change in the balance of forces between workers and entrepreneurs that had a tangible impact on the workplace, affecting workers' and also entrepreneurs' everyday life. While the state actively promoted a massive unionization of workers, Peronist institutional imagination proliferated: severance pay, minimum wage, supplementary annual salary, paid holidays, right to strike and the extension of the pension system coverage. One could also mention the creation of labour courts within the judicial system to mediate disputes between capital and labour, as well as professional regulatory statutes (ordinances with legal force regulating the activities of a profession, industry or trade) and mandatory collective labour agreements (deals between companies and trade union representatives, concerning aspects such as the amount of working hours, wages, holidays, overtime allowances, decent working conditions, etc.). But it was not all about 'labour justice'. The extension of labour rights was associated with 'social justice' – one of the Peronists' nodal points – a signifier that, once instituted as such, never stopped (even today) broadening its meaning.¹ Social justice policies also included housing, health and education.

In this context of overwhelming counterhegemonic advance over the sedimented order, Eva Duarte – becoming Eva Perón and later just Evita (a name that means 'little Eva' in an affectionate way) – incarnated a radicalized leading place. She became the head of a foundation that held her name and that – neither being part of the state nor granting Evita an official public office – was instituted as the (constitutive) supplement of state policies for social justice developing multiple activities. However, the remarkable aspect is that it was the place from which Evita built a unique bond with the underdog, which went from person to person or from received letter to received letter that she personally attended or replied to respond to various demands and requests. In this way, Evita could carve and share the place of the leader alongside Perón. Evita went far beyond herself, incarnating the most powerful antagonistic character of Peronism: while the contempt towards her from 'those above' grew, she was becoming the voice and the vindicating symbol of identification for the underdog (she had a background

of poverty, was a ‘natural daughter’, came from a small little town, she was an actress – a profession that at the time was not considered entirely decorous – married to a man who was 24 years older, she was illiterate and did not have previous political experience, etc.). As a *primus inter pares* (she was popularly called ‘the standard bearer of the humble’), she was the one able to reverse and attach a positive political value to signifiers that had an ignominious meaning and claim dignity for being a worker, that is, one ‘from below’. By addressing the people as ‘my shirtless’² or ‘my greasy’, Evita was not only appropriating those insulting words, but was also taking away their enemies’ denigratory weapons, returning them in a reversed sense as insignias of proud political belonging back to the people. Evita’s early death only reinvigorated her name as a lasting surface of inscription for the people’s emancipatory demands. At the same time, she became the figure that represented what was considered officially improper for the pre-Peronist state of things, thus attracting anti-Peronist hatred.

Political sovereignty was another nodal point of Peronist discourse. To create popular sovereignty was tantamount to building a ‘nation from below’. On the one hand, it meant the participation of the people in political matters mainly through unions, student unions, the Justicialista Party, the popular and massive rallies that gathered the people and its leaders to back and legitimize the changes in the status quo; but it also meant the participation of the people through the traditional forms of institutional exchange typical of liberal democracy. If we consider that the military government that in 1943 appointed Perón to the National Department of Labour did not interrupt a previous period of relatively well-functioning liberal democracy, but rather a decade of a conservative regime based on electoral fraud, the call for elections provoked by the popular mobilization on 17 October 1945 and the presidential elections in 1946 effectively inaugurated – after a long period of democratic absence – a period of legitimately elected governments. Peronism encouraged the effective participation of the previously excluded sectors in elections by expanding political rights: for instance, in 1947, backed by Evita, the National Congress passed the bill that established equal political rights for men and women, enabling women’s suffrage and, in 1949, the Female Justicialista Party was created.³ On the other hand, political sovereignty meant an anti-imperialist claim with a nationalist correlate, derived from the diagnosis that Argentina was a semi-colonial country (Ramos 2013 [1957]). The people had to become sovereign to defend Argentina and the nation from the pressure of the economic and political interests of powerful corporations and imperialist countries and their local partners (the oligarchy), beneficiaries of the semi-colonial schema. Then, to defeat imperialism was directly related to defending the nation by freeing the people from the oligarchic yoke. That was the national and popular task of Peronism, which linked the people with the nation.

A third nodal point was ‘economic independence’, an unavoidable aim to leave behind the semi-colonial status. This found expression in policies that, through the state’s active intervention, privileged the domestic market – along with industrialization – to favour small-scale entrepreneurs and workers in the income distribution over big businessmen linked to foreign corporations and the agro-export sector, responsible for the oligarchic model through which Argentina had traditionally inserted itself into the world (Murmis and Portantiero 1971).

Underpinned by these three nodal points (social justice, political sovereignty and economic independence), Peronism represented an antagonistic otherness to the previous regime, carrying out politics for ‘repairing social damage without compromising’, suggesting that ‘the logic... that operated in the configuration of the new rights... [was] not subject to negotiation and could not be subordinated to others considered, until then, as priority rights’ (Barros 2014:

110). This was the logic with which Peronism antagonized the existing hegemony in order to create a new one.

But what made Peronism a persistent trace was the radical consequence of attempting to become hegemonic: it was made clear that the previous regime was not naturally given but politically constituted and, therefore, open to dispute. Throwing thousands, for the very first time, into the public scene generated a shift from a subjective position of subordination to one of oppression (Laclau and Mouffe 2014 [1985]: 136–137). In a populist context, it signalled the passage from the underdog (a variety of subordinated non-politicized and non-articulated differential positions) to the people (a political subjectivity of differences articulated through leadership and organization) as a site of antagonism. Peronism interrupted the logic of subordination by interfering with laws and the institutionality of social justice within a sphere that the oligarchy considered its own private privileged domain. Industrial workers, agricultural labourers, maids within factories, estates, villas, mansions, rebelled through Peronism, demanding to be treated as subjects of rights in egalitarian terms. The potency of this movement disrupted the arrangements of the traditional oligarchic regime; this was the radical democratic and republican gesture opened by populism. If we consider, following Valeria Coronel and Luciana Cadahia (2018), that there is a democratic republican tradition opposed to the oligarchic one, Peronism incarnated the former: far from making antagonism invisible for institutions, it conceived institutions as a surface of inscription of antagonistic disputes for extending the people's rights. Peronism understood institutions in their egalitarian dimension as a space for the people to participate in order to question the frontier between those at the top and those at the bottom. The oligarchic republican regime was shattered. No matter how many attempts were made, it could never be re-established again in its former state: a form of government which made of law a mechanism for preserving privileges, that is to say, an institutional framework operating merely as a form of domination perpetuating inequalities.

THE OTHERS OF PERONISM

Where some found their first political participatory practice, others saw a politics of cooptation for manipulating the masses; where some lived an emancipatory experience, others lived an oppressive one; where some celebrated an expansion of rights, others suffered the collapse of the order they considered to be righteous; where some found relief in social justice, others were outraged by the distribution of perks; and where some gained dignity, others saw fomenting contempt. These others of Peronism constitute the anti-Peronist (anti-populist) field. And although the dichotomization Peronism/anti-Peronism has never fully overlapped with the social space as such – as there have always been remaining elements – to escape the force of these two poles remains a scarce experience in Argentinean politics.

It would be a mistake to think that the anti-Peronist field is only composed by conservative and neoliberal positions or the upper social layers, because it also incorporates heterogeneous middle social sectors and left-wing positions. If, for the conservative regime, Peronism signalled a break with the hierarchies and the proper order they considered their own (that to which they always wanted to return), for many in the middle social layers and the left it also meant an affront but for different reasons. For many in the middle sectors, Peronists were a threat to their expectant social positions achieved within the conservative regime (to the extent that between similar socio-economic groups – such as the middle class and lower-middle

class – we find what Freud (2007 [1930]) called the ‘narcissism of small differences’, insofar as the social mobility prompted by the egalitarian impulse of Peronism put at risk the (small) socio-economic differences in social status that had traditionally existed between them).⁴ For the traditional left, Peronism was seen as the cause for the working class’s deviation from its due course and also as an obstacle to a future they projected (worker’s behaviour should have followed the European pattern of development either towards communism or towards a social democratic society).⁵

In any case, anti-Peronism was a segregating reaction to a hitherto indifferent existence that had now become antagonistic through its political subjectivation as ‘the people’. This reaction unveiled a powerful ‘racist and classist character’ (Grimson 2019), pervading the social field as Peronism’s irruption shattered the imaginary identification with a thriving white ‘European’ well- and proper behaved Argentina. What gives us a clue here is the widespread use – from left to right – of the affronting name ‘little black heads’ (condensing a series of meanings such as ‘inferior’, ‘without culture’, ‘badly behaved’, ‘underdressed’, ‘immoral’, etc.) that unlike ‘shirtless’ or ‘greasy’ could not be reversed into a positive and dignifying sense, not even by Perón or Evita. Appealing to psychoanalysis, we find that Lacan studied hatred and racism (as a paradigmatic segregating violence) in terms of an economy of *jouissance* (enjoyment).⁶ Enjoyment – which defines the most singular character of any being – is ‘the negative pleasure that is the result of gratification pursued beyond the pleasure principle’ (Hook 2020: 276). As speaking beings, we are all affected by the lack and structural impossibility of having full access to enjoyment, but the peculiar detail is that this lack of enjoyment is experienced as being stolen by the other. And this is the source from which the segregationist hatred emerges: upon the perception that the other is (partially) incarnated in concrete others who have stolen my own enjoyment and consequently have access to full enjoyment at my own expense. This fits perfectly well with an understanding of why Peronists – the incarnated otherness – became intolerable, unleashing anti-Peronist (racist) segregationist violence. Peronist enjoyment was perceived to have been gained through the theft of non-Peronist’s *jouissance*, when they destroyed the order in which the latter fitted. This is the reason why Peronist leaders and militants or any member of the populist people incarnated, in the eyes of anti-Peronists, corruption as such; all that they were, had or enjoyed was at the expense of stealing (*jouissance*) from non-Peronists. From an anti-populist position, Peronists were seen like this: they grab all the amount of enjoyment for themselves, taking what is not meant for them, going into places where they do not belong, becoming visible and audible, abjuring their subordination, demanding rights, participation, equality and even attempting to rule. This is the unbearable excess of Peronism.

Hatred also has a ‘unifying effect’ (Freud 2008 [1921]): what anti-populists have in common is their hatred towards populist leaders and the people. But, according to Lacan (1988 [1966]), there is also something else: segregating hatred targets the traits that define the other’s being. This is the dimension that allows us to say that anti-Peronism denies recognition of Peronists as a legitimate part of the community and, therefore, its task is to eliminate Peronism. However, this task may acquire different forms: to domesticate, punish, humiliate or straight eradicate the antagonistic presence of ‘the people’ and its leaders. All of which fed the fantasy that, by eliminating Peronism, the broken history of Argentina could be healed and its supposedly pre-determined destiny reinstated.

Anti-Peronists justified their hatred on a diagnosis with two nodal elements: Peronism was corrupt and authoritarian. The accusation of corruption did not only indicate their ‘certainty’

that Peronists were abusing power from their new public positions, it also had a broader sense (we have already mentioned the ‘theft of enjoyment’ hypothesis): Peronism was perceived as constitutively corrupt in itself. Yet the paradox was that notwithstanding the expansion of rights, the participatory policies for the underdog and conducting legitimate elections, the accusation of authoritarianism was not baseless: ‘there was a kind of silence amidst the hustle and bustle of the time’ (Ramos 2013 [1957]: 128). Peronism promoted an ‘authoritarian democratisation’ (Semán 2021: 123) as there was – particularly after 1950, at the peak of the antagonism with ‘those above’ – an attempt to narrow the opposition’s activities without annulling them completely (including the harassment of free speech, the persecution of opponents, federal interventions in provinces, municipalities or autonomous public universities, etc.). Facing these facts, the opposition could easily perform the rhetorical operation of identifying itself as the defender of liberal, democratic, anti-fascist and republican values painting the local political arena in colours which derived from the international one, making the anti-Peronism versus Peronism antagonism match that of the Allies versus Nazis/fascists (mass demonstrations and intense official propaganda also helped to build this idea). However:

the question about the context makes the issue more complex. On the one hand, because in the mid-twentieth century the notion and demands of democracy that spread decades later were by no means widespread in the world then. On the other hand, because in Argentina prior to Peronism there had only been a brief democratic experience between 1916 and 1930. But, above all else, the question is how much political liberalism could be built by those who claimed to embrace the democratic values of the time. (Grimson 2019: 27)

Indeed, if we consider the types of practices developed by anti-Peronists to get rid of Peronism, we have to assume that ‘either no one incarnated liberal values, or [that] they were inapplicable in the Argentina of that time’ (Grimson 2019: 17).

The ways of getting rid of Peronism varied in each anti-populist formation: in 1955, in an attempt to kill Perón, the Navy bombed Plaza de Mayo and Government House, leaving hundreds of dead behind; later they succeeded in a coup that culminated in a repression that included executions, incarcerations and inaugurated an 18-year-long proscription of Peronism from public life. During these years it was even forbidden to mention Perón’s name; Evita’s corpse was stolen; in addition, the military sanctioned ‘democratic governments’ sprung up from elections where Peronism had been excluded; years on, a series of coups took place, following periods in which the proscription was loosened, until reaching the state terrorism of the last civil-military dictatorship (1976–1983) that left 30,000 disappeared (most of them Peronist militants). Last but not least, in 2015, for the first time, an openly anti-populist coalition won a general election, taking businessman Mauricio Macri to the presidency until 2019. But the anti-populist practices did not cease: not only did Macri’s government repress social protest, but it also put pressure to disarticulate social and political organizations, as well as persecuting social and political leaders (particularly all those linked to the *Kirchnerista* version of Peronism) by supporting dubious judicial procedures along with a strong media campaign against populist leaders.

Anti-Peronism is not weak; proof of this is that the Argentinean political field is structured around an antagonism towards Peronism, a dichotomization that has been defined as a ‘hegemonic standoff’ (Portantiero 1973), insofar as neither of the two antagonists have been able to establish a lasting hegemony, while at the same time both possess the capacity to block the hegemonic pretensions of the other.

THE LEGACY

There are many Peronisms. In each historical repetition, Peronism has been different from itself, moulded and moulding each diverse political context. After the coup that, in 1955, overthrew Perón, sending him into an 18-year-long exile, ‘the Peronist resistance’ version began. If the anti-populist political task was based on two axes – namely, the proscription of Peronism and the economy’s restructuration through opening the market and inviting foreign investment, expecting a period of growth that would help disarticulate the Peronist people, sending it to oblivion – the emergence of ‘Peronist resistance’ was the proof of its failure. Little by little, the accumulation of frustrated demands, as well as the impossibility of absorbing them, nourished a widespread movement that involved the rearticulation of equivalent chains around Peronism with signifiers such as ‘Struggle and he comes back’ or ‘Long Live Perón!’, restructuring the populist people around the demand for the return of Perón, which was associated with the possibility of overcoming any frustrated social demand. In this context, by the 1960s, middle sectors that had rejected Perón years earlier identified themselves as Peronist together with a myriad of left-wing sectors, and also even with conservative and right-wing sectors (aspiring to achieve a balanced society through a class conciliatory model in which union leaders would share roles with entrepreneurs). The name Perón had, by then, assumed the dimension of an ‘empty signifier’ proper (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014 [1985]).⁷

In 1973, the demand for the return of Perón succeeded and, for the third time, he was elected president with a majority of 62 per cent. But, by that time, the extension of the chain of equivalence was such that it started dismantling itself due to its own untenable expansion, resulting in a violent struggle between different sectors of Peronism about which direction Perón’s third government should take. Instead of reactivating the historical antagonism between ‘those above’ and ‘those below’, Peronism scattered itself, overtaken by a left versus right antagonism within the people. This version of Peronism marked the limit of Perón’s own leadership just before his death in 1974.

After the civil-military dictatorship (1976–1983), the anti-populist task felt accomplished: populism seemed to have been defeated. The capitulation of the populist field was mostly evidenced in the two successive Peronist governments of Carlos Menem (1989–1999), elected through the Justicialista Party. Menem gave in to all the demands by the historical antagonists of Peronism, even pardoning the highest-ranking military personnel responsible for the state terrorism and developing a neoliberal agenda. If Menem ‘did not provoke a massive proud identification’, if ‘it was a period in which the “us” was in suspense, under reconsideration, in doubt’ (Grimson 2019: 263, 268), this was because the anti-populist project had proven successful: with a devastated militancy, with the chronic absence of ‘the people’ and their populist leaders, there was no populism, although there were Peronist governments. It seemed as if Peronism had finally been domesticated.

However, the absence of ‘the people’ and populist leaders was called into question 20 years later with the arrival of another Peronist – Néstor Kirchner – who was elected president in 2003. In this last repetition of Peronism, we find the reactivation of populist elements that seemed to have been thrown into the dustbin of history, never to return. In spite of anti-populist wishes, as Freud had already warned, once inscribed, memory traces are impossible to annihilate because ‘in mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish... everything is somehow preserved and... in suitable circumstances (when, for instance, regression goes back far enough) it can once more be brought to light’ (2007 [1930]: 69–70). The suitable

circumstances for the return of populism were created by the breakdown of the neoliberal model triggered by a debt crisis in 2001 that left record rates of poverty, unemployment and the insistent demand that ‘everyone must go away’, directed against a blurred notion of the ruling class (politicians, magistrates, bankers, big corporations’ chief executive officers, etc.) accused of being responsible for such a collapse. The memory traces of historical Peronism were reactivated by an emerging Kirchnerism that – rearticulating ‘the people’ as an active political subject – reassumed the politics of ‘repairing social damage without compromising’ (Barros 2014), reintroducing itself as the antagonistic antithesis of whatever or whoever could be associated with the crumbling neoliberal experience.

Kirchner’s leadership and Kirchnerism (as the renewed name for the people) started emerging, firstly, when the government responded to those most damaged by the neoliberal model: the urgent social demands incarnated by the *piqueteros* – the unemployed social movements – and the demands of human rights organizations incarnated by the Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo – repealing the pardons to the military men responsible for state terrorism, reopening trials for human rights violations and starting pedagogical memory policies. Secondly, when it began antagonizing the most vulnerable (workers, pensioners, consumers): contesting the deregulation model and reintroducing mandatory collective labour agreements, backing wage recovery and opposing increases in public utility companies and fuel rates, etc. All these issues were matters of ‘social justice’, but ‘political sovereignty’ and ‘economic independence’ were also back in public political discourse when, from the very beginning of his government, Kirchner antagonized the International Monetary Fund and the bondholders in the external debt renegotiation, successfully resisting their pressure to implement austerity policies.

In this way, Kirchner reintroduced politics back into the limelight, breaking the mandate that the only rationality available was to follow the diktats of the neoliberal elites. Once again, the nationalist trace was reactivated linking the destiny of ‘the people’ to that of the nation: giving priority to the people meant to defend the nation and to antagonize the international neoliberal elites and their local subsidiaries. The remarkable aspect is that – in a regional context of collapsing neoliberalism and the arrival of populist governments – this nationalist trace was translated into a transnational solidarity among oppressed Latin American peoples and their leaders as a way to reinforce positions in local antagonisms with the elites. Besides, ‘political sovereignty’ meant the return of the public presence of the people in massive rallies as a political practice of popular participation and above all the revitalization of Peronism. Kirchnerism, in that sense, relaunched Peronism by returning it to its populist form, as many, especially young people, turned to militancy, responding to Kirchner’s call to get involved in politics, increasing political participation. While, however, Kirchner was leaving the presidency with a growing economy and the rates of poverty and unemployment descending, and high levels of approval, anti-populism was also starting to reactivate itself.

Kirchner did not run for re-election after his term in office was concluded, so it was his wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner – a senator who had a long political career – that got elected as president in 2007 with 45 per cent of the vote, and then re-elected in 2011 with 54 per cent.⁸ Her presidencies were characterized by the radicalization of populist elements, on the one hand, within a heightened populism versus anti-populism antagonism and, on the other, with a model of expansion of rights in which the role of the state as a surface for the inscription of demands in an egalitarian sense was decisive. Cristina’s Peronism emphasized the political decision to articulate ‘the people’ anchored in the signifier ‘equality’ and, consequently, promoted state policies in pursuit of its establishment. Equality, associated with social justice,

was the nodal point that condensed the identification with Kirchnerism. So, once again, as with historical Peronism, a populist government opened institutions as a terrain to dispute the boundaries between ‘those above’ and ‘those below’. However, this populist repetition of Peronism through Kirchnerism incorporated a variety of demands that had not previously been inscribed as popular and, therefore, had never become part of the people. The government thus matched socio-economic demands with policies such as the Universal Child Allowance (which ensured an income for informal workers earning less than one minimum wage for each child under the age of 18) or Connecting Equality (that attempted to reduce the digital educational gap by distributing computers to students in state schools). We have to add the approval of the ‘egalitarian marriage’ and the ‘gender identity’⁹ laws that responded to the demands for equal rights of the LGBTI+ movement. Indeed, if the logic of the populist articulation was based on equality, nothing prevented the LGBT+ movement’s demands to match the demands from other social sectors in terms of equality and be included within ‘the people’.

The chain of equivalence was enlarged with demands of different kinds while antagonizing the opposition in the name of equality. In this way, the signifier ‘those below’ covered not only those who had been damaged in socio-economic terms by the neoliberal elitist model, but also those who could be identified, in a wide sense, as excluded, oppressed or vulnerable. The consequence was that opposition to ‘those above’ also grew larger, including those who, in one way or another, maintained a situation of relative privilege in the status quo only when disregarding their position of inequality in some other respect. Passing the ‘egalitarian marriage’ and ‘gender identity’ bills, the government antagonized the Catholic Church, evangelist creeds and different conservative sectors. But there were at least three more antagonistic struggles that marked Cristina’s governments: the antagonism with agro-business exporters of soya and some other agricultural products that resisted an increase in export duties, which updated the signifier ‘oligarchy’ as part of the populist antagonism in the sense of wealth distribution; the nationalization of the pension system (which made it possible to extend the entry of workers into the system), that irritated bankers and financial actors; and the antagonism with the mass media condensed around the Clarín Multimedia Corporation because of the law that regulated communications and broadcasting services (the government attempted to change the law inherited from the dictatorship to deconcentrate the public opinion space). Cristina left office in 2015 with the lowest Gini coefficient¹⁰ and the highest minimum wage in the region.

More recently, Alberto Fernández was elected president in 2019, with Cristina as vice-president, in a new coalition, Front of All, that rearticulated the Peronist field. From the beginning, Fernández had to deal with the same ‘curse’ that had haunted Kirchnerist governments: dealing with the debt crisis left by their neoliberal predecessors (but this time with the added bonus that Macri’s former businessmen government had also left an alarming inflation rate). Beyond that, his government innovated in two ways: first, by promoting a Peronism of caring tasks and feminism. Facing the COVID-19 pandemic, it developed state care policies of lockdown and vaccination. And attempting to match the demands of the ‘Not One Woman Less’ feminist movement that had irrupted a few years earlier, Fernández continued with the tradition of inclusion by expanding the scope of rights, creating institutions such as the Ministry of Women, Gender and Diversity to reinforce equality as the fundamental aspect of social justice and also passing bills such as the legalization of abortion, the transgender quota employment in state agencies and the recognition of care work as a job (adding years of social security service according to the number of children). By positioning his government as a mild version of Peronism, Fernández attempted to circumvent the dichotomous division

of the social space by moving in terms of a continuity between the populist and anti-populist antagonistic fields. However, trying to avoid the frontier effects not only generated tensions that threatened to disarticulate Front of All but, paradoxically, also facilitated a rejection from the anti-populist camp. All of which shows that in a country with a sedimented populist political culture, to escape the force of the two poles is an extremely difficult and rare experience.

CONCLUSION

It is worth concluding by pointing out two dimensions that the study of populism rising from the Peronist experience and its lasting legacy opens to broader debates. (1) The case of feminists and LGBTI+ demands indicates that in a populist structured political terrain it seems to make no sense, for a social struggle, to remain as a particularity. Only by responding to evolving popular demands, that is, by articulating other oppressed demands, is it possible to reach political potency to change the status quo. (2) The people under Peronism has never been unified; that is, it has never become a closed identity attempting to reach full transparency. On the contrary, its nodal point (social justice) has never stopped broadening itself and changing its meaning, incorporating diverse demands, thus making the people of Peronism a heterogeneous articulation of differences.

This brings us to our final point: if ‘the people’ in Peronism, a case of populism commonly accepted as exemplary, has nothing to do with the homogeneous figure of the people-as-one, it may be time to critically examine the widespread interpretation that automatically establishes links between populism, the people, homogeneity and fascism. What if the complexity of populism demands it?

NOTES

1. The formal name adopted by the Peronist party is Justicialismo.
2. ‘Shirtless’ meant poor or improperly dressed. Workers showed up at demonstrations without wearing coats, with their sleeves rolled up or their shirts open – which broke with the appropriate dress codes of the time – as a way of expressing their identification with Peronism. The gesture was also reaffirmed positively by Perón, who delivered his speeches with his sleeves rolled up.
3. The role played by Evita regarding women’s struggles is paradoxical. While in her speeches she often reproduced the traditional conservative phrases about what should be the place of women in society, at the same time, her call for women to get involved in politics and her vindication of women’s right to have a voice in politics resulted in the intervention of many women actively participating in politics – also in managerial and organizational positions – which were opposed to the expected forms of political practices and public debates of the time (Perrig 2018).
4. The phrase ‘narcissism of small differences’ indicates that the intensity of hatred and intolerance is strengthened when it is based on the smallest differences rather than on fundamental ones.
5. A good example of this argument can be found in De Ípola and Portantiero (1981).
6. For the link between hatred and racism see Freud (1992 [1920]); Lacan (1997 [1967]); Miller (2010).
7. According to Laclau and Mouffe (2014 [1985]), the empty signifier is the particular element that assumes the structurally ‘universal’ function within a discursive field. It assumes such representation because it is overdetermined as it condenses the largest number of associative chains.
8. Kirchner died in 2010, at a time when it was expected that he would run again for the presidency in 2011.

9. It established that any trans person could register his/her personal identification with a chosen name and sex; it also stipulated that medical treatment for gender reassignment should be included in the public health-care system.
10. The Gini coefficient measures inequality according to the distribution of wealth.

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8. Patterns in Italian populism: from the Common Man's Front to the Five Star Movement

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INTRODUCTION: POPULISM IN ITALY

Whether one defines populism through taxonomies (Canovan 1981), discourse theory (Laclau 2005) or the ideational approach (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Mudde 2017), whether one sees it as an 'explicit affirmation of politics in the service of a part' (Urbaini 2019: 387), a 'real danger' for liberal democracies (Müller 2016: 103) or an opportunity to renew them (Errejón and Mouffe 2016), Italy is and has been fertile soil for its flourishing. The Italian political traditions and party system would probably not pass the test of a contextualist analysis of populism, like that conducted vis-à-vis the United States by Anton Jäger (2017): the concept of *populismo* was rarely used in the Italian political, journalistic and academic milieu up until the 1950s, when it was employed by Venturi (1952) in his seminal work on Russian *Narodnichestvo*.¹ However, if we follow the current dominant definitions – despite their limitations (highlighted in Frank 2020; Katsambekis 2022; Stavrakakis 2017; Venizelos 2019) – Italy has been undoubtedly marked by the features of what has been largely categorized, especially in the last two decades, as populism.

In fact, since the fall of the so-called *Prima Repubblica* (First Republic)² in the 1990s, Italy has experienced many political phenomena often regarded as populist: from the regionalist claims of Umberto Bossi's Lega Lombarda–Lega Nord (Lombard League–Northern League), to Silvio Berlusconi's tycoon party Forza Italia (Go Italy!), from Matteo Renzi's rhetoric of renewal to Matteo Salvini's xenophobic rants (Biorcio 2015; Tarchi 2015).

However, the most interesting recent phenomenon is the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S, Five Star Movement). Initially presented by its founders as a non-party,³ the movement has changed a lot throughout its brief history, affecting – and being deeply affected by – the entire political system, rising in less than a decade from an outsider position to that of a significant ruling party (Padoan 2022). Some of the instances that characterized the M5S in its early steps have been described as unique in Italian history. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the republican era, we can locate another party that seems to have shared the same initial core ideology with the M5S: the Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque (FUQ, Common Man's Front). Neither the FUQ nor the M5S were born as class or mass parties, nor were they political expressions of an economic or intellectual elite, nor the electoral arm of a military force. Both parties relied heavily on demagoguery but abhorred political violence. Both were imagined and put in place by unconventional men who came from show business and public communication and had previously had little to do with politics: Guglielmo Giannini in the case of the FUQ and Gianroberto Casaleggio – with Beppe Grillo – in the case of the M5S. Neither the FUQ nor the M5S can be completely identified with the beliefs of their founders, but their peculiar charisma, blurred ideals and unusual political behaviour were essential to the birth and development of both parties. In many historical, sociological and political aspects, the FUQ and the M5S differ

profoundly. Nevertheless, they share essential characteristics that deserve to be highlighted to understand better the Italian political landscape and the role of populism in the country today and in recent years.

GUGLIELMO GIANNINI AND THE COMMON MAN'S FRONT IN THEIR HISTORICAL CONTEXT (1943–1948)

In the hectic months around the fall of Mussolini's regime, as the anti-fascist partisans and the Allied forces began to liberate Italy from Nazi occupation, the mass parties previously chocked by fascism organized in the Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale (National Liberation Committee). Despite their differences, the Democrazia Cristiana (DC, Christian Democracy), the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI, Italian Communist Party) and the Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI, Italian Socialist Party) – together with minor forces like the liberals, the Partito Repubblicano Italiano (Italian Republican Party) and the Partito d'Azione (Action Party) – guided the country away from dictatorship and monarchy, introducing the 1948 Constitution. This collaboration set the anti-fascist basis for the political life of the emerging republic, while the geopolitical implications of the Cold War established the two main parties, DC and PCI, as the interlocked pivotal forces of government and opposition, respectively. However, while the new institutions, government and party system took form, the FUQ came to life as an unprecedented movement questioning both the fascism/anti-fascism and the left/right dichotomies.

The movement was the brainchild of the renowned journalist, playwright and director, Guglielmo Giannini. Born in Naples in 1891, son of a Pugliese journalist and a British woman, Giannini was home-schooled following an anarchic and cosmopolitan pedagogic inspiration. He worked in different jobs and served his country in Libya and the First World War before following his true passions: journalism and show business (Lomartire 2008). His attitude towards fascism was neither collaboration nor opposition. His life and work during the Fascist *ventennio* were almost entirely apolitical until, in a few crucial months during the Second World War, his father died in poverty and his son in battle. Giannini elaborated on his grief and rage by writing a book that he wished to become the basis of a new political ideology, manifesto and movement: *La folla. 6000 anni di lotta contro la tirannide* (The Crowd: A 6000 Year Fight against Tyranny).

In *La Folla* (1945), Giannini depicted a vulgarized Lockean conception of property, which led to a peculiar ideal of fair society, made of equal but unrelated members, each an owner of limited space in hive-like communities. This utopian evolution of the state of nature could be achieved thanks to technological and industrial progress, which allowed every household to maintain its autonomy and property while embracing social and economic development. In its infancy, mankind needed leaders to face natural obstacles, but the development of modern infrastructures rendered elites unnecessary. The evolution of communication technologies created the conditions for a complete horizontality of relations between men, destroying unfair structures of power and opening the way to non-professional politicians in a technocratic 'administrative state'. The United States of Europe – one of Giannini's political goals – were to be the triumph of a hyper-individualistic conception of society, one which rendered conflicts and ideologies – and ultimately politics – useless while making the crowd's individuals completely free (Giannini 1945).

Shortly after writing *La Folla*, in December 1944, Giannini founded a weekly newspaper, *L'Uomo Qualunque* (The Common Man). In the north of Italy, the Resistance fought against the fascist-Nazi occupation. The centre-south, already liberated by Anglo-American forces, was formally under King Vittorio Emanuele III's rule but governed by the Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale. Giannini's Rome-based publication gained immediate success criticizing the purges to low-rank fascist bureaucrats and striking a chord with a silent but widespread resentment towards both fascism and anti-fascism.

In Giannini's opus, 'the relationship between politics and entertainment is crucial to understand one and the other, starting from the fact that his political communication shows traces of the experience gained in national show business' (Cambiaghi et al. 2021: viii). Translating his rhetorical style into political debates, using ironic and vulgar language, Giannini's column 'Le Vespe' (The Wasps) demagogically mocked and belittled the new anti-fascist ruling class. To him, it represented just a new form of dictatorship run by a new group of 'Professional Political Men', a caste that he believed to have vexed mankind since the dawn of civilization (Giannini 1945). His attacks became harsher after every failed and incoherent attempt to bring his peculiar philosophical-political ideas into the established parties and collaborate with almost each of them. A misplaced accusation of fascism threatened his freedom and activity: Giannini's fame grew stronger after the case was proven baseless and got dismissed.

Groups supporting *L'Uomo Qualunque* emerged in many locations. The initially reluctant Giannini – aware of his inability to guide an actual political movement – understood that he had to ride the momentum if he did not want to see it vanish. The FUQ was founded during the first national congress in Rome on 18 February 1946, following a spontaneous and anarchic bottom-up organizational phase involving political personnel coming from all ideological directions: from communism to fascism, but with a prevalence of liberal, monarchist and conservative men. By that time, *L'Uomo Qualunque* had become the most widespread weekly newspaper in the country, selling 850,000 copies per week at the end of 1945. What held together this lively, blurred and ideologically scattered universe was the anti-elite rant that Giannini had been launching from his papers, represented by the motto: *Abbasso tutti!* (Down with everybody!). The movement presented many aspects that we could categorize as populist, while contemporaries defined it as *qualunquista*.⁴

Giannini's transversal strategy appealed to *galantuomini* (gentlemen) from the entire political spectrum, demonized professional politicians, praised common sense and common people and stated that the crowd did not need rulers but only temporary administrators. He derived these attitudes from his experience as a successful playwright able to catch the mood of large audiences no matter what their deepest beliefs were. However, this plebiscitary but fragmented support weakened the unity and the intermediate bodies of the rapidly growing party. Therefore, Giannini tried to reinforce his leadership despite his initial will to remain just a 'Founder' (Setta 2005 [1975]: 86) and a temporary spokesman (Cocco 2018). Tensions with other prominent figures of the FUQ remained vibrant throughout the brief life of the party. The FUQ, born out of the idea of eliminating leaders and professional politicians, quickly became full of them. Although Giannini's 'blind empiricism' (Setta 2005 [1975]: 66) allowed him to keep the ranks together in the first days, a paranoid and authoritarian turn in his attitude was finally among the reasons for the party's disappearance.

The party's agenda aimed primarily at securing the Rooseveltian Four Freedoms in an administrative state guided by a powerful Supreme Court. The *qualunquisti* advocated for strong economic liberalism and the privatization of state-owned companies. Although

inspired by the American political tradition, the FUQ promoted foreign policies independent from the United States and aimed at creating a European Union (EU). Giannini captivated the petty-middle bourgeoisie electorate, which had lived a modest but secure life under the fascist regime without getting too involved in it, and was afraid of a communist-socialist wave perceived as imminent after the war. The FUQ had unexpected electoral successes in 1946. On 2 June, the majority of the Italian people voted in favour of the republican state and elected representatives to the *Consulta Nazionale* (National Council): although practically non-existent in the north, the FUQ gained notable support in the centre-south, becoming the fifth party on a national scale with the 5.27 per cent of the vote. The FUQ came close to Benedetto Croce's liberals and surpassed a pivotal anti-fascist force like the Action Party, which appealed to the same middle-class electorate. As Norberto Bobbio, a non-elected candidate for the Partito d'Azione, later commented: 'For as long as the Action Party – leaders without an army – carried out its function as a political movement, the petty bourgeoisie – an army without leaders – was *qualunquista*' (Bobbio 1951: 906). Thirty elected *qualunquisti* joined the Constitutional Assembly, and Giannini became the third most voted representative after De Gasperi and Togliatti. In the administrative elections of November 1946, the FUQ reinforced its achievements in the centre-south, obtaining good results in northern cities. Giannini's discourse, constantly anchored to Catholicism and focused on absolute individualism, anti-communism and anti-statism, weakened centre-right-wing parties like the liberals, the monarchists and the DC, which paid for its government collaboration with communists and socialists. The industrial bourgeoisie even directed significant money flows to the FUQ.

However, soon enough, the DC recanted its left-wing alliances, regaining its solid centrist position, which was all the more necessary as the solidification of the Cold War blocks established Rome as an essential piece in the United States' sphere of influence. The repositioning of the DC in the spot it would later occupy for decades left no space for Giannini's political enterprise. The FUQ's internal divisions grew and the 'Founder' reacted despotically. Moreover, after his appeals for a government coalition with the DC failed, he held a public dialogue with Togliatti, suggesting cooperation between *qualunquisti* and communists. This impossible move ignited the final collapse of the FUQ.

Giannini had been trying to merge the FUQ with Croce's liberals throughout the years, and the party had even changed its name to Fronte Democratico Liberale dell'Uomo Qualunque (Common Man's Liberal-Democratic Front). The Neapolitan philosopher always rejected the offer, responding that 'an elite party cannot gather masses within its ranks' (Setta 2005 [1975]: 93). Against Croce's will, the FUQ eventually merged with the Partito Liberale Italiano (Italian Liberal Party), but the coalition had poor results at the 1948 general elections. Giannini was initially excluded from Parliament, and the FUQ's political trajectory ended. Almost forgotten as a party, *qualunquismo* survived and prospered in Italian culture as a concept describing an indifferent, anti-political, anti-party, demagogic and populist attitude. These features led populism scholar and former right-wing activist Marco Tarchi to describe *qualunquismo* as the 'prototype of contemporary European populism' (2002: 121), which is nonetheless debatable.

THE POLITICAL SYSTEM IN TRANSITION: THE RISE OF NEW POPULIST FORCES

The post-war party system – whose ideological, electoral, social and economic power had suffocated Giannini's aspirations – began to crumble at the beginning of the 1990s. The end of the Cold War deprived major parties of financial support from the superpowers, while the signing of the Maastricht Treaty at the EU level withdrew key Keynesian elements from the Italian economy. The PCI abandoned communism in 1991, morphing into the Partito Democratico della Sinistra (Democratic Party of the Left). The DC and the PSI were crushed by massive judicial investigations into political corruption like *Mani Pulite* (Clean Hands).

The dismantling of the Prima Repubblica parties opened the way to – and was accelerated by – new actors, that were unconventional for the Italian political traditions but similar to contemporary European demagogic forces. Similar to the Belgian Flemish Block, Bossi's Lega Lombarda–Lega Nord fused 'sub-national identity politics with populism' (Taggart 2017: 253). Animated by a vulgar anti-south imaginary, it gained power in the north, accusing politicians in Rome of economically aggrieving the most productive regions of the country, for which it claimed independence. In 1994, Silvio Berlusconi, a media, sports and real-estate tycoon, who benefited from various political ties during the 1980s, used his television empire to launch Forza Italia, a party claiming to defend the country from a communist illiberal turn. Prosecutor Antonio Di Pietro became popular as a protagonist of *Mani Pulite* and in 1998 founded L'Italia dei Valori (IDV, Italy of Values). The party's focus on the *questione morale* (moral issue) in politics gained him accusations of *giustizialismo* (justicialism).⁵

These experiences differed from one another but showed a strong personalization of party leadership – similar to Giannini's – and presented themselves as an antidote to the illnesses of the previous political era. By the 1994 general elections, the political spectrum had changed entirely. A bipolar system, revolving around the confrontation between a right-wing front led by Berlusconi and a centre-left one guided by the heirs of PCI, DC and PSI (which in 2006 merged into the Partito Democratico [Democratic Party]) lasted for more than a decade. The two sides alternatively served as government or opposition but showed a substantial continuity in economic policies (liberalism and non-interventionism) under the increasing supervision of EU institutions. Political discontent grew, with surveys detecting that 75.3 per cent of Italian citizens felt little or no trust in parliamentary institutions (Eurispes 2008).

GIANROBERTO CASALEGGIO AND THE FIVE STAR MOVEMENT IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT (2005–2016)

On 8 September 2007, the famous comedian Beppe Grillo launched through his blog a so-called Vaffanculo-Day (V-Day, Fuck-Off Day). Grillo had been a television personality from the late 1970s to the early 1990s when he started touring theatres with shows based on consumers' rights and environmental issues and gaining a transversal fanbase by attributing his distance from television to censorship. A quasi-Luddite at that stage, he would crash computers with a baseball bat during his performances (Santoro 2013: 11–36). In 2004, however, an encounter with Gianroberto Casaleggio turned him into a digital enthusiast. Born in Milan in 1954, Casaleggio worked for the visionary information technology company Olivetti. After many ups and downs as a manager or chief executive officer of private and state-related com-

munication companies, he founded his own, Casaleggio Associati (CA), with his son Davide, in 2004 (Salvatori 2013: 129–142). CA created the blog *beppegrillo.it* on 16 January 2005. The blog's daily posts became a multiplier for the comedian's cutting-edge takes on politics and society, which echoed between theatres and the internet. Casaleggio hid from the spotlight, but his techno-utopian ideas transpired through company videos and publications, as well as on *beppegrillo.it*, whose authorship was disputed (Casaleggio et al. 2013: 12–13). If Grillo was the face and voice of the rising *grillini*⁶ movement, Casaleggio was its mind and body.

V-Day relied on the *Amici di Beppe Grillo* (Grillo's friends) support groups formed since 2005 via the *meetup.com* service, aggregating online and at local meetings. The emerging groupings were similar to the early *qualunquisti* groups: people with different political backgrounds formed both gatherings around anti-establishment messages sent by a renowned comedian with a mocking language through widespread but marginalized media. However, the *grillini* groups were much more assonant than the *qualunquisti* to their leader's political messages and attitudes. Like Giannini, nonetheless, Grillo claimed to be just a 'megaphone', while Casaleggio's declared goal was 'leaderless direct democracy' (Casaleggio 2016: 31).

Casaleggio's techno-utopian ideas moved from assumptions similar to those expressed in *La Folla*, also absorbing Marshall McLuhan's theories, marketing-derived ethical principles and science-fiction (Casaleggio Associati 2007, 2008). Like Giannini, Casaleggio believed that communication technologies – from ancient Rome's roads network to the internet – were vital to understanding human evolution. Thanks to the internet, the flow of information became horizontal in a society composed of isolated but linked prosumers. According to Casaleggio's vision of the future, this net of individuals and peer-to-peer informational and economic interaction would also change politics, allowing the birth of globally connected meet-up cells. In a post-apocalyptic scenario, a Third World War would lead to the defeat of Eastern 'net-controlling' dictatorships and the triumph of Western 'net democracies'. Then, according to Casaleggio, a global governmental entity would take the place of nation-states and every human on the planet would acquire post-national citizenship and political rights by logging into a global social media platform. This long and meandering process would turn the peoples of the world into a multitude of singularities working together as a 'planetary brain' (Casaleggio et al. 2013: 70) called Gaia: Casaleggio foresaw it as a global democratic network where political, religious and ideological conflicts would disappear.⁷

With Casaleggio's prophecies on the backdrop and Grillo's demagoguery on the forefront, *beppegrillo.it* mobilized crowds in Italian squares against parliamentary corruption, recanting the political 'caste' of left and right. Grillo's attacks and nicknaming were similar to those of Giannini but also aimed at traditional media and journalism. The socio-political backlash of the 2007 crisis, with right and left parties agreeing on economic austerity, privatizations and neoliberal reforms, created the perfect environment for a new anti-establishment force to emerge. Between 2008 and 2010, local and regional elections registered successes of *Amici di Beppe Grillo* lists, built on ideas of environmentalism, online direct democracy, meritocracy, non-professional politics and bypassing of the left/right dichotomy. The latter features were reminiscent of *qualunquismo*, as proven by the interview that Giannini's niece – former actor Sabina Ciuffini – gave to *beppegrillo.it* to launch her portal *unaqualunque.it*. However, contrary to Giannini, who looked for alliances from the first steps of his political enterprise, Casaleggio opted for a strict policy of non-collaboration with other forces. Nevertheless, CA was also managing the online communication of Di Pietro's party, IDV.

The media and political capital accumulated around *beppegrillo.it* showed its potential during the June 2009 European elections: *beppegrillo.it* campaigned for Luigi De Magistris, a former prosecutor focused on the links between organized crime and politics, who ran as an independent candidate in the IDV lists. De Magistris got elected as Italy's second most voted candidate after Berlusconi. Much like Giannini, Casaleggio and Grillo were *de facto* leading a political movement through their media.

On 4 October 2009, the 'non-party' M5S was born. Its symbol made it clear that *beppegrillo.it* was the M5S headquarters: praising horizontality, the movement was legally dependent on Grillo and Casaleggio's will (Santoro 2013: 97). The blog/movement was also a primary source of income for CA (Salvatori 2013: 120–126). Between 2010 and 2011, Di Pietro and De Magistris ended their relationships with Casaleggio, who they accused of interfering in political decisions. The elected *grillini* had to comply with Gianroberto and Davide Casaleggio's guidance not only on communication issues – television appearances were prohibited to the early recognizable faces of the movement – but also on organizational, political and economic matters if they didn't want to be ousted from the M5S, as happened to many long-time militants in 2012 (Di Majo 2013: 33–64).

Despite this centralizing approach with no intermediate bodies, the M5S's visibility and political role grew, emerging as an alternative to a political system that was incapable of renewing itself. Between 2011 and 2013, Mario Monti's technocratic government – imposed *de facto* by EU institutions – implemented strong austerity reforms with the support of almost the whole parliament, multiplying political discontent.

The M5S faced the 2013 general elections from an outsider position: well beyond the poll predictions, it gained 25.56 per cent of the ballots for the Chamber of Deputies and more than 8 million votes. Neither Grillo nor Casaleggio ran for office, but the elected *grillini* – 108 deputies and 54 senators – were mostly people with no political experience, unknown to each other and selected via online primaries by a few thousand movement members. At their arrival in Rome, Casaleggio imposed strict rules of conduct with the press and other political forces, keeping the control of the parliamentary groups in his and Grillo's hands. Since its arrival in parliament, the M5S has gone through many different phases: from a policy of zero alliances, it has come to be allied – in different moments, since 2018 – with all but one of the current parliamentary forces; from an anti-establishment movement it has become a major ruling party; from a solid two-fold leadership it is trying to evolve into a collegial direction of elected representatives under the fragile guidance of former prime minister Giuseppe Conte; from opposition to political careerism it has come to question its two-mandates limit (which, however, was eventually maintained); from an online-based entity with no territorial structures it is attempting to root into society; and from refusing the left–right dichotomy it has come to declare its belonging to progressivism. However, Casaleggio saw and directed only the first of these phases because he passed away on 12 April 2016, leaving his leadership role to Grillo and his son Davide. The former still loosely influences the M5S's trajectory, while the latter was unable to keep control of the party within CA structures.

POPULISM AS MASS LIBERALISM

Much could be said about the differences between Giannini and Casaleggio, starting from the fact that the former's political naiveté left him economically broke while the latter was able

to direct part of the benefits of his political adventure to his own company. However, besides their different personal outcomes, they share political instincts and ideas. Giannini embodied the passionate demagogue and the apprentice political organizer, while Casaleggio outsourced the former task to Grillo. Both Giannini and Casaleggio admired an author often associated with populism, Rousseau: the first to underline that modern men lived an unnecessary servitude under their leaders, the latter to reinforce his utopia of online direct democracy, to the point that the *grillini* controversial participatory platform was named after the Genevan thinker (Deseriis 2017; Gerbaudo 2019). Although Giannini and Casaleggio managed their political communities in an authoritarian way, both claimed to be founders instead of leaders, spokespersons instead of chiefs, organizers and lawgivers instead of bosses and rulers, somehow mimicking *Social Contract's* clairvoyant figure of *The Legislator*. Moreover, they both showed distrust in organized currents: the *General Will* is usually interpreted as the most populist of Rousseau's ideas, but Giannini and Casaleggio instead relied on his way of founding political participation on isolated and autonomous individuals.

Giannini's and Casaleggio's bizarre utopias allow understanding of the link this sort of populism holds with the European liberal tradition. Giannini and Casaleggio did not primarily appeal to the people as a uniform body: the first praised the *folla* (crowd) or *galantuomini* (gentlemen) prevalently, the latter spoke to the *cittadini* (citizens) or *gente* (folks). Their 'people' resembled more a bourgeois gathering than a storming plebs. Locke himself conceived a similar sort of 'people' necessary to fulfil and protect natural individual rights:

Wherever therefore any number of Men are so united into one Society, as to quit every one his executive power of the Law of Nature, and to resign it to the public, there and there only is a *political, or civil Society*. And this is done, wherever any number of Men, in the state of Nature, enter into Society to make one People, one Body Politick, under one supreme Government. (Locke 2016 [1689]: 45)

As Margaret Canovan has shown, it is right in the period between the English Civil War and the American Revolution that the English term 'the people' acquired its ambiguous and politically contested meaning: it could refer to the common people as a social class, but 'it could appear also as an incoherent but appealing amalgam of the *national* people with its proud inheritance of law and *individual* people, equal human souls before God' (Canovan 2005: 19). Giannini's and Casaleggio's 'people' shows this mixture of individual and collective features, ambiguously building upon them a political vision: the people is not identified as a nation, nor as the subaltern classes, rather it is composed of common men aspiring to live isolated but connected in a technologically developed and politically pacified version of the State of Nature.

This lack of homogeneity of 'the people' is a feature shared by many political actors identified as populist (Katsambekis 2022). Nevertheless, mainstream discourses often state that the people of populism is *ipso facto* a non-pluralist block that denies individual rights. Therefore, populism and liberalism are usually defined as irreconcilable. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, for instance, define populism as an 'illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism' (2017: 116). Jan-Werner Müller, on the other hand, has noted that it might be common to hear of 'liberal populism' in the United States, but 'that expression in Europe would be a blatant contradiction, given the different understandings of *both* liberalism and populism on the two sides of the Atlantic' (2016: 9). However, at least in the Italian case, one could argue that populism and liberalism share the same roots: the *qualunquisti* and *grillini* populisms rely on the individualistic basis of classical European liberalism and represent its

extreme and contradictory outcome. What Giannini and Casaleggio seem to have envisioned is an aspiration to a sort of mass liberalism.

In this regard, it is worth noting that the only re-edition of *La Folla* so far has been promoted by the liberal think tank Fondazione Luigi Einaudi (Giannini et al. 2002). Besides describing Giannini as a ‘radical and structural populist’, even a liberal scholar and pundit like Giovanni Orsina remarked that his ‘populism was also liberal to a certain extent, because it did not recognize any form of collective identity that might distinguish one individual from another, endangering their “commonness”’ (Orsina 2014: 36). Therefore, he labelled *qualunquismo* as the ‘purest form of liberal populism that Italy has ever experienced’ (Orsina 2014: 35), founded not on a collective subject but on the individual. Something similar can be said about Casaleggio’s fascination with the internet as a collection of ‘individualities’, each owner of himself, a utopia made of ‘billions of proprietors’ (Casaleggio et al. 2013: 129), which is not in contrast with declaring himself a proud populist in a 2013 crucial rally. Like many other left- and right-wing European populist actors that have risen after the crisis of 2008, the M5S founded its consensus on the critique of the neoliberal ethos and establishment (Padoan 2022). However, while it is crucial to underline M5S’s commonalities with contemporary European anti-neoliberal forces like Podemos (Borriello and Mazzolini 2019), it must be noted that the Spanish party relied in its early steps on the Laclau-derived hypothesis of ‘building the people’ as an alliance of collective identities (Errejón and Mouffe 2016: 153), not of single individuals. The M5S further proved its connection to liberalism after Casaleggio’s death: in January 2017, 78.5 per cent of the *grillini* members voted in favour of breaking the alliance with UKIP and joining the ALDE group in the European Parliament, which, however, ALDE denied.

CONCLUSION

Giannini’s and Casaleggio’s ideal of atomized political participation recanted the excesses of capitalism, like its tendency to protect traditional elites or cut its ties with democracy through a neoliberal configuration of society. However, their techno-utopian visions were founded on the idea of individual economic freedom that arose from classic liberalism. Their populism did not embrace nationalism or socialism; it did not identify ‘the people’ as a social class or ethnic or religious group. Instead, it tried to build ‘the people’ as an aggregation of individuals, horizontally connected but deprived of any sense of ideological belonging. Beyond their historical differences, the *qualunquisti* and *grillini* populisms embodied – at least in the intentions of their founders – an aspiration to liberalism for the masses. Therefore, such a variant of populism can be defined as collective individualism or – in a more political nuance – mass liberalism.

NOTES

1. The word *populismo* did not appear in Italian dictionaries until the late 1950s. Previously, even when used, *populismo* mainly was referred to literary movements. Gramsci, for instance, did not use *populismo* when referring to phenomena nowadays often regarded as populist such as Bonapartism and Boulangisme (Cingari 2021: 35–37).
2. This ambiguous but widely used definition identifies a First and a Second Republic despite the persisting 1948 Constitution.

3. The founding *Non statuto* claimed that the M5S ‘is not a political party nor will it be in the future’ (www.politicalpartydb.org).
4. *Qualunque* means ‘whichever’, ‘common’ or ‘undefined’. In Giannini’s intentions, it referred to the man of the streets. Soon enough, a journalistic neologism emerged – *qualunquismo* – to mock Giannini’s demagoguery. He initially recanted but later embraced it.
5. The Italian *giustizialismo* differs from the Argentinian *justicialismo*: the latter is a synonym for Peronism; the former describes the will to engage a malfunctioning and corrupt political system through eye-catching judicial actions.
6. Grillo means ‘cricket’, so his followers became ‘little crickets’. Beppegrillo.it also launched a news/propaganda programme titled *Mosca tsé-tsé* (Tsetse fly). This odd recurrence of intentional and unintentional references to insects links *qualunquismo* and *grillismo*. Novelist Vincenzo Latronico properly centred his *La mentalità dell’alveare* (The hive mentality), inspired by the M5S early days, on these metaphors.
7. The idea comes from Isaac Asimov’s 1982 *Foundation’s Edge*. Gaia was a fictional planet where humans learned to share a global group consciousness.

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9. From Poujade to Jean-Marie Le Pen to Marine Le Pen: a populist lineage in France?

Annie Collovald

INTRODUCTION

Historical narratives are also political narratives. They are as much ‘historiographical operations’, to borrow De Certeau’s expression (De Certeau 1974), as they are spaces for the resolution of ideological conflicts and symbolic struggles, which have seen certain representations of past phenomena imposed over others and which continue to generate new and consolidate old interpretations to the present day. The reconstruction of the genealogy of political movements participates directly in these struggles because it decides not just the historical and political legitimacy of these groupings but also their present intelligibility. The populist filiation attributed to the Front National (FN) in France (renamed the Rassemblement National in 2018) is a perfect illustration of this. Historians traced its lineage back to Poujadism in the 1950s and then further back to Boulangism in the nineteenth century. This chapter examines the fabrication of this lineage along with its modalities, the ensuing issues and consequences. A socio-historical reconstruction of this process will be useful for understanding both the success of populism, which has become a transhistorical and transnational phenomenon (Collovald 2022), and the present-day risks to democracy.

As has been demonstrated elsewhere (Collovald 2004), this filiation was a recent invention that did not derive from any pre-existing historical or sociological knowledge. Constructed on non-existent empirical foundations, it aimed to give substance to a noun that, while it had first emerged within a specific context, was abstract and unknown as a category of political analysis and had no commonly accepted meaning in France. To paraphrase Foucault, the word (‘populism’) preceded the thing (the filiation). This situation was paradoxical and risky as far as a historical approach is concerned because it was a source not only of projections but also of a certain discrepancy with the observed reality. The reason the FN did not generate much controversy in France was not so much because the commentators all agreed on its ‘truth’ but because it left them indifferent. The events and personalities that had emerged from the limbo of history were considered second-rate and not to be taken seriously, and they had no contemporary advocates. While the Poujadist filiation was important in the early 1980s for identifying and categorizing the FN, it was not mentioned after that. The characterization nevertheless remained in place but with a completely different, albeit still pejorative, signification. The different stages in this conceptual dynamic will be examined in some detail below.

THE UNEXPECTED RETURN OF THE FAR RIGHT

There was widespread astonishment when the FN emerged from its groupuscular state onto first the local and then the national political stage – in the 1983 Dreux elections; in the 1984

European elections, where it made a staggering breakthrough (11 per cent of the vote); and then in the 1986 French parliamentary elections, where it gained 35 seats (with around 10 per cent of the vote) under the new proportional representation voting system. To say that everyone assumed the FN was incapable of ever gaining a foothold at national level or becoming part of the democratic landscape is indeed an understatement. The debunking of this assumption triggered some lively interpretive debates between politicians, journalists, intellectuals and historians. At first, Jean-Marie Le Pen's party was unanimously condemned as a politically illegitimate and morally unworthy group that represented the anti-republican far right or, worse still, a renewed fascism. In any case, it represented a danger to France's democracy, because its past radicalism was deemed incompatible with the rules of a peaceful political system. The central concern at the time was the FN's ideological profile, as expressed by its key figures and embodied by its activists. Historical commentators were split on the subject, with some highlighting its xenophobia, some its racism and some its nationalism, and their conclusions were directly reflected in the political and journalistic debate, where there were differences of opinion on the 'correct' attitude to adopt towards this party (whether Le Pen should be invited onto television shows and thus be given a platform, whether he should simply be ignored, whether it was possible to form alliances with him, etc.).

Within the context of this fierce debate over what type of right the FN represented, a new categorization was beginning to emerge. Highly marginal in respect of the predominant fascism classification, 'national populism' or 'populism' was a notion that aimed to clearly situate and categorize the FN not within the political arena but mainly in relation to the existing democratic system. Populism was right wing but not far right or fascist. It was the new, popular right. Admittedly a little radical, it was nevertheless free of any real anti-democratic intent. This notion thus suggested there could only be one explanation for the success of Le Pen's party. The demagogy of a charismatic leader had manipulated the fears and resentments of lower-middle-class social groups (in other words, the 'average' French person or the *beauf*) who had already been primed by their drop in social status (actual or feared) to become xenophobic and authoritarian.

The 'national populism' or 'populism' notion was new, in France at least, and certainly as a framework for analysing a political movement. Unlike other countries (such as the United States, Russia, Argentina or Brazil), no movement in France had ever either claimed the label or been labelled as such. Uses of the word 'populism' were very restricted. Until the 1980s, it was entirely absent from the vocabulary of French political polemics, where terms such as 'demagogy' or 'Poujadism' were used instead. In the 1990s, people began to apply the term to politicians to criticize their boorishness or condemn the fact that they appealed to the people's instincts or passions rather than their reason (for example, Jacques Chirac and Edith Cresson paid the price of being labelled 'populist'). The word was mainly used in line with Lenin's definition (in his criticism of the *Narodniki*, a group of Russian intellectuals who, under the tsarist regime, went to the people to organize the peasants' rebellion) to denounce a misguided strategy of mobilizing the people against their own interests and against their proper advocates. In the French political science literature, it was used in the wake of American political science studies to refer to the archaic and authoritarian solutions adopted by developing countries new to democracy as well as in communism research to criticize *ouvrierism* (the term was used in the communist world to valorize popular culture, as for example in the prizes awarded for populist literature).

However, the most elaborate scientific uses of the word ‘populism’ appeared in the sociology of culture. Populism here referred to one of two inclinations that intellectuals had in their (erroneous) relationship to the people (the other being miserabilism), which was to valorize the working classes, their cultural autonomy and their ‘authenticity’. Sociologically speaking, this was a misconception because, as Claude Grignon and Jean-Claude Passeron (1989) pointed out, the working classes are both autonomous and dominated at the same time.

Applying the word to the FN brought about a shift in register and more importantly a change of perspective by forcing the notion to undergo a complete ideological inversion. The gaze was to migrate away from the leaders and activists towards the voters and away from the lower-middle classes towards the working classes, thus inverting the meaning of ‘populism’. The word that had once valorized the people, driven by progressive utopias, now stigmatized them as ignorant, gullible and ready to trust the far right and at the same time rebuked their spokespersons. In the early days of the FN’s presence on the national political scene, the word ‘populism’ had not yet become established in the same way that the word ‘fascism’ had (this did not happen until the 1990s). Historians of the time (for example, René Rémond, Michel Winock and Serge Berstein) debated how to justify the ‘populist’ characterization of the FN. In typical historiographical fashion, they ascribed historical depth to it and identified predecessors that proved it belonged to a lineage that was distinct from fascism. Their intervention was collective, coordinated and presented through different scholarly and media outlets, including research articles, books, colloquia, textbooks and press articles.¹

AN INVENTED AND UNLIKELY FILIATION

The aforementioned historians invented a populist filiation to give credence to this new ‘populism’ label (this filiation had never been mentioned in any previous historical works on contemporary political life). They traced its origins back to the emergence of a new right at the end of the nineteenth century that had managed to mobilize ‘the masses by repeating a few slogans over and over again’ (Winock 1990). Boulangism and Poujadism became the emblematic precursors of this alleged new populism. They were presented as movements that had claimed to be both ‘social’ and ‘national’ and that had called on *vox populi* in defiance of the established parties. These movements played the ‘small’ against the ‘big’ and ‘principally rallied those who felt discontented, threatened or worried about the socioeconomic transformations’ under way in France during those periods (Winock 1990). These two precedents are interesting in that they both entered the political memory as discredited. Their intellectual and political disqualification was symbolized by their disastrous protagonists (General Boulanger² and Pierre Poujade), who failed to take the opportunity to seize power and disappeared very quickly from political life. However, the claimed continuity between these movements and the FN seems very unlikely. There was no specific heritage (in the form of parties, practices, ideals or knowledge and know-how) handed down from one to the next. The only thing likely to have united these movements that were separated in time was the ‘populism’ label that was attached to them retroactively. A primary indicator of this is that no key figure in the FN, least of all Jean-Marie Le Pen, ever referred to Poujadism³ or showed any allegiance to it in terms of modes of action borrowed, ideological repertoire defended or experiences shared. In fact, it even served as a foil. Conversely, the Poujadists were, in their day, more than resistant to the ‘charisma’ that supposedly also characterized Jean-Marie Le Pen.

The 'Poujadism' label was not neutral. It was an offensive, multi-sectoral and distorting (Collovald 1991) representation of this mobilization of small traders and artisans (who, incidentally, did not recognize themselves at all in the label and never used it to refer to themselves). This anti-tax protest movement, which emerged in the 1950s and spectacularly and often violently rallied against tax officials, was perceived as staging a claim to self-representation in the trade union world of small traders (it thus took part in the trade union chambers elections against, notably, the Confédération Générale des Petites et Moyennes Entreprises, a longstanding, respectable union that focused on clientelist links with the political parties in order to promote the cause of small business owners). The movement's organization, the Union de Défense des Commerçants et Artisans, soon began to create turmoil in both the political and the small business worlds. It was subjected to surveillance and scrutiny and then became discredited. Depicted as the last hurrah of an outdated past, it became 'Poujadism', a movement with no possible future or successor because it was so confined to a present that was in the midst of collapsing. Indeed, it quickly faded from the political scene. While the first clashes had come in 1953, in 1956, to everyone's surprise and contrary to all the commentators' forecasts, 51 Poujadists had entered the Palais Bourbon⁴ (the election of 11 of these members was subsequently invalidated). The movement was nevertheless to disappear in 1958 with the new legislative elections linked to the establishment of the Fifth Republic that saw De Gaulle come to power.

Although the political movement ultimately collapsed (only two Poujadist representatives were re-elected in 1958), the 'Poujadism' label itself experienced a second, symbolic life. It entered the repertoire of insults used in political polemics and history textbooks to refer to a failed movement made up of shopkeepers whose businesses were in decline. Their intellectual poverty combined with a certain resentment linked to their downgrading had predisposed these small traders to subjugation by the 'humble stationer from Saint-Céré', Pierre Poujade, a 'loud-mouthed' 'demagogue' whose positions were mocked because they combined 'verbal pomposity' with the 'vulgar' language 'of the rabble' and the charisma of an orator designed to win over 'beret-wearing, baguette-eating, beer-drinking, wine-guzzling France' (Rioux 1983). This scholarly and political representation of Poujadism was officialized in school textbooks, popular historical magazines and general works on the Fourth Republic (these various publications were, moreover, produced by historians mobilized to define the FN). It was also evidenced in dictionary definitions (for example, in *Larousse* and *Le Petit Robert*) of Poujadism as, for example, 'a short-sighted approach to making demands' or 'the petty bourgeois attitude of refusing to accept socio-economic change'. In short, the conclusion was obvious. The Poujadists were 'short-sighted, backward-looking people' whose historical illegitimacy could be explained by their social and intellectual illegitimacy and who failed because of their social and intellectual inability to exist politically. Case closed. That, however, was the wrong verdict (Collovald 1989). The Poujadists' political failure and the offensive and totally discrediting representation of their movement owed less to who they were than to the specific context in which they emerged.

AN OVERLOOKED OPPOSITION

The Poujadists' political and symbolic misfortune was largely linked to an *unanticipated confrontation*. There was, simultaneously, another competing and powerful claim to political

interpretation and action, this time from a highly self-regulated group of technocrats, trade unionists, journalists, intellectuals, young students, employers and economists, who were united at the time in proposing alternative social and political models and benchmarks (such as 'executive manager', the 'modern', 'governing', 'decision-making' accountable statesman). Equipped with effective social, intellectual, political and ethical resources and situated at the forefront of many different fields, this group rallied behind a figurehead who was armed with a superlative appeal under the Fourth Republic, which promised political, economic and ethical modernization, namely Pierre Mendès France.

This modernizing, Mendès-led 'nebula' quickly mobilized (in 1953, at the time of the first local revolts against the tax officials) to publicize what this movement of small traders and artisans stood for. They invented the word 'Poujadism' and disseminated it across multiple platforms (journalistic, political, technocratic, business, trade union). They presented the word under an image of Pierre Poujade's face covered with the stigmas of the ignoble working class. Although they also identified with the people, they positioned themselves on the other side of the looking glass to Poujadism. According to them, this 'Poujadolf'-led movement was 'archaic', 'backward-looking', 'anti-modern' and 'reactionary'. They claimed that it was dangerous for democracy and that it peddled a fascism that was all the more formidable for being a 'poor person's fascism'. The 'moderns' thus succeeded, by playing with representations and conquering the whole of political commentary with their invention of 'Poujadism', in imposing a dominant interpretation that symbolically downgraded a section of the respectable middle classes to the dirty, dangerous working class. In fact, they managed to kill two birds with one stone by presenting this ignoble 'working class' as a competitor to the politicians of the Fourth Republic. They brandished 'Poujadism' in the faces of these representatives of a political order, whose hierarchy of power they hoped to subvert for their own benefit, as concrete proof of the regime's powerlessness to prevent the return of a movement that threatened democracy and, more generally, as confirmation of the debility of a regime that, in their eyes, had been crumbling from the very start – they saw Pierre Mendès France's dismissal as the *Président du Conseil* (head of government under the Fourth Republic) on 5 February 1955 as evidence of this (Collovald 2003).

This was a brutal attack, both politically and morally. It had two effects. On the one hand, it obscured the fact that, however humble they may have been, these artisans and small shopkeepers were 'respectable rebels', minor local notables. They were not activists at heart (they were ultimately incapable and lacking in resources and thus doomed to disappear). The initial purpose of their revolt was not just to protest against the tax system but to self-represent and defend themselves against what they saw as attacks on their respectability and honour in the form of the brutal inspections and accusations of fraud they were subjected to. On the other hand, these representations created by the 'modernizers' masked their own disappointment and what Poujadism had done to them. As Frédéric Tristram (2005) showed, during the post-war period, senior civil servants, expert advisors and some politicians working within the closed environment of the administration and particularly within the *Direction Générale des Impôts* (tax authority), created in 1948, began to look on fiscal policy as an instrument for growth and economic policy (and no longer just as a tool for social redistribution). This implied a whole series of reforms, a reorganization of administrative structures and a modernization of tax inspection techniques adapted to market rules. The large Fordist company model with its supposed economic efficiency and the Americanization of firms (productivism and company mergers) promoted by senior civil servants and a section of the business community

prevailed. Conversely, the loss of small businesses deemed too numerous and cumbersome for efficient economic development was seen as inevitable. As Tristram noted (2005: 380), even though these reforms gave rise to some tensions, they were nevertheless all going ahead, that is until the Poujadist movement appeared and ‘brought everything to an almost complete halt for nearly five years, between 1954 and 1959’ (Tristram 2005). Not only did this movement hinder and, in some cases, even completely thwart the modernizers’ plans (who had not anticipated it at all) when they came up against their competitors, who called for negotiation and compromise,⁵ it also created dissent and mutual distrust between senior civil servants, the government and members of parliament, on the one hand, and between local elected representatives (many of whom argued in favour of the Poujadists’ grievances) and prominent figures in their parties, on the other. Finally, it forced the public authorities to drastically review their position and implement a tax cuts policy (contrary to their initial intentions) to benefit the self-employed, which they never publicized (Collovald 2018).

The historians’ elaboration of this convenient populist filiation was based on this self-serving play on and with representations. Because they did not examine the construction of this received image of Poujadism, the features deemed to be common to the Poujade movement (and also Boulangism) and Jean-Marie Le Pen’s FN were merely a semblance. Indeed, this lineage was not so much uncovered through investigation than imagined through prejudice. What were the reasons for this, and what were the issues associated with it?

SPECIFIC HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ISSUES: NO FASCISM IN FRANCE

As already mentioned, when the FN appeared on the national political scene in the early 1980s, the ‘populist’ label was far from salient. The terms ‘fascism’, ‘far right’ and ‘Poujadism’ prevailed. These ‘present-day’ historians felt there was an urgent need to historicize the FN’s presence. For them, characterizing the FN was both a historiographical matter and a matter of professional integrity.

These historians, who were specialists of the 1930s period (from the rise of the far-right leagues to the Vichy period), defended, against foreign historians, the idea that there could be no fascism in France. French society was ‘allergic’ to it, and the political space on the right was fully occupied by three rights (legitimism, Orleanism and Bonapartism, according to Rémond’s analysis (1982)). However, the FN’s arrival on the political scene and the vitriolic characterizations it attracted contradicted this claim and forced the historians to come up with another definition of the party and of the current situation in France. They declared that the FN was ‘populist’. It had changed. It had ‘acclimatized’ to democracy through its repeated participation in elections, and its attitudes were far removed from fascist violence. This historiographical controversy around the existence of a significant, crystallized fascist ideology in France rattled the profession. I will not go back over the fundamental debate here between these historians and Zeev Sternhell, following the publication of his book in 1983, *Ni droite ni gauche, l’idéologie fasciste en France* (*Neither Right Nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*), but the leading historians on twentieth-century political history at the time (those affiliated with the Institut d’Études Politiques de Paris and the Université Paris Nanterre) put forward the idea of a French society that was ‘allergic’ to fascism to refute his analysis (Berstein 1984;

Dobry 1989). Through the prism of this debate, these historians therefore became participants in the political and intellectual contest to identify the FN.

These controversies also coincided with the historians' mobilization to construct a collective professional identity that distinguished them from other specialists in political life. In the mid-1980s, historians specializing in the twentieth century began to engage in an attempt (the Institut d'Histoire du Temps Présent was created in 1978) to rehabilitate political history by constituting it as a discipline in its own right, with its own founders, emblematic topics and methods (Rémond 1988). Seeking to differentiate their analytical approach from those of social historians (associated with the *Annales* school) and historical sociologists, which they deemed too 'deterministic', their aim was to give the 'great ideological constructions' back their autonomy and a major role in explaining political phenomena (origins and evolution). Their focus on the subject of 'the right' thus proved to be a real game changer in this respect. They asserted Rémond's work, *Les droites en France*, as the 'great classic' that had established their professional identity and underpinned the fundamental approach they had developed. This approach centred on classification work, which was based on identifying political traditions originating in the nineteenth century that had been reactivated up to the present day, conducting analyses through creating filiations by linking discourses put forward or ideologies defended, and elaborating the most current phenomena by investing them with the 'depth of time'.

THE POLITICIZATION OF HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ISSUES

The 'real history intrusion' represented by FN's emergence and ongoing presence in the political game prompted these historians to investigate the topic. The FN had a political past (it had existed since 1972), and it was headed by a political veteran (Jean-Marie Le Pen was elected to the Assemblée Nationale in 1956 as a 'Poujadist'), who was surrounded by men with a Vichy and collaborationist past and a continuing engagement in political activism. While the historians all agreed that the FN's marked ideology situated it on the right but not at the fascism end of the spectrum, their conclusions differed as to the type of right it represented (Counter-Revolution or Bonapartism, or even a new tradition that was alien to the Republic) and its degree of dangerousness (and therefore unacceptability). When called upon to comment on the FN then, they were unable to agree on their 'historical' and political judgements (was the FN legitimate, or did it still maintain an extremist anti-democratic position?). Their differences were further compounded by a whole series of new tensions arising from the publicizing of their debates (which until then had been strictly confined to their own sphere) on the regime positioned closest to fascism in France (Vichy) and the genealogy to be attributed to it.

The end of the 1980s and the 1990s saw a marked politicization of the historiographical issues specific to these historians' period of specialization, the *années noires* (dark years). Recent events had conferred a strong topicality on the period that was widely considered to be the most shameful and controversial in French political history, namely the Vichy regime, the collaboration and their origins. These events included the Klaus Barbie trial in 1987, the prosecution of René Bousquet in 1991 (who was assassinated in June 1993), the strongly criticized adoption of the Loi Gayssot in 1990 (making Holocaust denial an offence), the scandal of the 'Jewish file' in November 1991, the controversies surrounding the commemoration in July 1992 of the Vel' d'Hiv Roundup, the Paul Touvier trial in the spring of 1994 and, finally,

the Maurice Papon trial in October 1997 (Conan and Rousso 1994). They also opened up the field to new competitors who were claiming to ‘do history’ (notably journalists, politicians, intellectuals, essayists and above all lawyers and judges). The historians’ monopoly not just on historical research but on the ‘telling of history’ was disputed. Even the definition of the social role of these historians became a topic of discussion.

Their analysis of the Vichy government, long held to have been entirely subject to the German occupation and therefore hardly exemplary of the French political tradition, had moreover been profoundly undermined by the work of foreign historians, in particular Paxton and Marrus (Paxton 1973; Marrus and Paxton 1981), who showed that the regime, far from having been totally dominated, had sometimes, including in relation to subjects crucial for assessing its degree of autonomy (such as the deportations of Jewish populations), anticipated the occupier’s wishes. In that sense, their definition of Vichy as an authoritarian, conservative, anti-revolutionary, elitist, Maurrassian regime did not correspond with what was being said in the French courts or reported in the press (when the Vichy men were in the dock for their alleged involvement in the ‘final solution’) or indeed with what other historians, both foreign and French, were beginning to expose.

THE POPULIST FILIATION: A DERADICALIZED LINEAGE

By resurrecting the most disparaging and widely accepted image of Poujadism, these historians mistook this damning representation of Poujade’s ‘popular charisma’⁶ and the ‘people’ who identified with him, which had been constructed primarily in response to specific political issues, for the truth. As already mentioned, the aim had been both to discredit the Poujade movement, which was at odds with the proposed new social and political orientation, and to use the movement to make a case against the Fourth Republic regime and its protagonists. In other words, with this ‘populist’ filiation that they had fabricated, the historians were replaying the official line that there was only one opposition to the incumbent regime (the Poujadists) and that the ignorance and intellectual weakness of this opposition meant it was very unlikely to pose a danger to the Republic. They overlooked the other much more structured and powerful opponent (the ‘modernizers’), as if only – in French political history at least – a vulgar, second-rate disloyalism, driven mainly by individuals who had already been defeated by the course of history, was possible. These historians were therefore producing a form of ‘deradicalization’ or ‘defascistization’ of both the past and the present. Although there had been severe condemnations of fascism (rightly or wrongly, it is not important here) in relation to the Poujade movement (as there had been in relation to De Gaulle and his party, the *Rassemblement du Peuple Français*, at the time), this was sidestepped in favour of projecting the image of a pitiful leader. The troubling filiation then became reassuring. Democracy would be protected by the weakness of its opponents. The FN’s entire past (which is incidentally still very present) was also circumvented. There was no mention of the involvement of many of its members in the collaboration with the Nazi occupiers during the Second World War, in actions supporting French Algeria (*Organisation Armée Secrète*, attacks, assassinations, etc.) during the Algerian War of Independence or, more recently, in the ultra-violent actions of some of its youth groups. All these involvements could have led to the construction of different filiations (provided the method was sound), such as with the extremist and anti-Semitic leagues of the 1930s or the groups advocating a ‘national revolution’ (against leftist opponents, Jews, women,

homosexuals, Roma, etc.) with Pétain and Laval in the Vichy government (Muel-Dreyfus 1996). Finally, the historical filiation attributed to the FN acted as a screen. It concealed the fact that this populist framing resulted from a recent and imported phenomenon (as previously mentioned, no political movement in France had ever claimed the populist label).⁷

The notion of populism was imported from the United States by Pierre André Taguieff, a philosopher specializing in reactionary ideologies and an expert on the debates driving the new American right, which is where he borrowed the term and its implicit philosophy from. In the 1970s, the American far right adopted 'populism' as its emblem to distinguish itself from the liberals (right-wing men recruited from the white Anglo Saxon Protestant elite). There was no 'appeal to the people' here or any popular sympathies. It was simply a cynical use of the people to confer a semblance of philanthropic ethics on an economically and politically ultra-conservative group. This self-serving myth, which bore little relation to reality, was thus transferred to Le Pen's party. It offered the party a recognized place in the democratic political arena without having to work for it and a new identity that was, although still pejorative, much more legitimate than that of fascist. Le Pen's party thus hastened to assume this identity in the mid-1990s, presenting itself as a 'populist party', the party of the working classes and, in line with the work of new analysts, France's 'first workers' party'.

During the French presidential elections of 1995, the exit polls conferred a certain (questionable) realism on the FN's new identity and mobilized new interpreters (pollsters, political scientists, journalists), who were using the same analytical frameworks based on ideas, values and ideologies (and not on a social history of the practices and causes defended) as the 'present-day' historians. The exit poll results showed that almost 30 per cent of manual workers, office workers and unemployed people reported they had voted for the FN. Was this abstraction turned into fact, or pure representation turned into reality? A fairly unscientific demonstration of circularity had taken place based on after-the-fact, ad hoc evidence adapted to preformed conclusions. The FN was populist because it principally attracted the working classes, and it attracted the working classes because it was populist. The FN was therefore no longer situated in relation to fascism but in relation to democracy. Le Pen's party was a threat to democracy not because it was seen as anti-democratic but because it was thought to be too democratic. It wanted to give too much power to the people. It was the people who now posed a problem for democracy and also, indirectly, all those who intended to represent them and present their cause. The representatives of the left could therefore now be criticized and condemned for being just as much a threat to democracy as the FN (and subsequently the Rassemblement National) representatives. With the political extremes converging (Mélenchon and Le Pen were eventually seen as similar, both despicable and dangerous populists), censorship was being lifted with the return of long-discredited, highly conservative and even reactionary theses (authoritarianism of the working classes, danger of the 'excesses of democracy', etc.). Alongside the invented filiation, then, there were increasing references to the fascist leagues of the 1930s and to the great popular leaders, such as Jacques Doriot, who were led astray by anti-Semitism and Nazi collaboration (which, as we have seen, was unthinkable as an 'origin' of FN populism). As time has passed and the political situation has changed, a new observation has been made. Populism has always been fascism, but hidden behind left-wing ideas. From this point on, rallying the people or popular groups was no longer a proof of democracy. In fact, it was to become the complete opposite.

CONCLUSION

To counter the idea of a universalization of ‘populism’, which is very often posited as a quasi-natural transhistorical and transnational phenomenon, this chapter has sought to show the importance of looking beyond the obvious, which is often the refuge of ignorance. By reconstructing the history of the ‘populism’ label, historical sociology reveals its arbitrariness and/or invented uses, its semantic inversions, the professional and political issues it encompasses and, above all, the prejudices underlying it.

The ‘origins’ of the characterization of the FN as a populist movement are a good illustration of such a process, which forms part of the more general mechanism of producing political legitimacy (or illegitimacy), as we have seen here with the stigmatization of working-class mobilizations and the defascistization of the FN. The specificity of the debates around populism is thus that they contribute to redefining the parameters of what is unacceptable in a democracy in which the notion of ‘the people’ has become a dangerous anomaly because individuals with an unworthy past and regressive ideas now pass for honourable political competitors. Is there not a risk here of ‘de-democratizing’ democracy?

NOTES

1. The 1997 special issue of the journal *Vingtième siècle* gives examples.
2. Boulangism – named after General Georges Boulanger, former minister of war in the young Third Republic – was a short-lived political movement (1885–1889). Its great popularity and mixed political support (ranging from the far right to the far left) worried the rulers at a time when the Republic was still unstable and competing with other forms of political regime (Bonapartism, imperialism, monarchism, etc.).
3. Jean-Marie Le Pen was nevertheless elected to the Assemblée Nationale in 1955 on the Poujadists’ Union et Fraternité française list. However, he only stayed three months with these elected members, claiming they were ‘half-wits’ and crassly politically incompetent. He was re-elected in 1958 as a candidate for the Centre National des Indépendants et Paysans, a right-wing party that also included the future French president Valéry Giscard d’Estaing among its members.
4. In terms of political forecasting, the Renseignements Généraux (the French police force’s intelligence branch at the time) did not help matters because its comments on the electoral mobilization capacities of the Poujadist candidates were also contemptuous. It described them as worthless, bland individuals with virtually no power at local level (see Souillac 2007).
5. As Gaiiti (1998) showed, political excellence under the Fourth Republic was based on the ability to negotiate and establish compromises. Alliances were forged on specific issues rather than on manifestos, which was precisely what those claiming to be modernizing economic and political life were fighting against.
6. This representation of Poujade as a charismatic leader was far removed from his mode of domination in reality, because he constantly faced dissent within his movement and never succeeded in imposing his views on the Union et Fraternité française members (see Collovald 1989).
7. This does not mean, of course, that there were no movements in France seeking to mobilize the working classes or ‘the people’ to fight against the established modes of domination and to seek emancipation from all forms of control that deprived them of liberty and equality. These movements, however, called themselves socialist, anarchist, communist and so on.

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PART III

THEORIES AND KEY THINKERS

10. Richard Hofstadter, modernization theory and the birth of a global populism debate

Anton Jäger

INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of his *What Is Populism?* (2016) – one of the most widely cited interventions in today’s global populism debate – Jan-Werner Müller makes a puzzling claim.¹ Closing the book’s third chapter, Müller informs readers that his definition of populism as an ‘anti-pluralist and anti-establishment identity politics’ does not apply to *all* movements historically classified as ‘populist’ (Müller 2016: 81). This holds especially for the original, late nineteenth-century American ‘big p’ Populists, who, in Müller’s view, do not qualify for inclusion in his category: ‘One of the results of the analysis presented so far, counterintuitive as it might seem, is that the one party in US history that explicitly called itself “populist” was in fact not populist’. As Müller mentions, the party in question arose out of the radical farmer agitation in the 1870s and 1880s. By 1891, the Farmers’ Alliances had united themselves into a political party. This party fought for presidency, Congress and state legislature in 1892, 1894 and 1896, respectively, fusing with Democrats for their last losing election. It was also the party that gave us the word ‘populism’ as a term (Aslanidis 2017; Houwen 2011).

What motivates Müller’s gambit? Earlier parts of his book offer readers some indicative hints. Part of the difficulty with integrating ‘big p’ Populism into a general story of ‘small p’ populism, Müller claims, is an erroneous but recalcitrant view of populism handed down by an earlier generation of American social scientists. Scholars such as Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Bell, Edward Shils and Seymour Martin Lipset, he claims, ‘began to describe what they considered to be “populism” as a helpless articulation of anxieties and anger... somewhere in the 1950s’. Their ‘thesis was not to remain uncontested’, however, and soon this ‘pluralist’ vision of populism faced a powerful backlash in both American historiography and social science. Yet their ‘background assumptions are still present among many social and political commentators’ and continue to condition contemporary debates (Müller 2016: 17).

Müller is one of the few participants in the populism debate to truly gauge the weight of this so-called ‘revisionist’ controversy on contemporary political theory and political science (D’Eramo 2013; Postel 2016; Stavrakakis 2017). As he mentions, this controversy ran across the 1950s and 1960s, when a ‘Hofstadter thesis’ was first launched in historiography to be subsequently taken up in social science by authors such as Lipset, Bell, Peter Viereck, Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils (Collins 1989; Greenberg 2007). Their thesis faced intense opposition in the 1960s and 1970s, mounted by a cohort of ‘counter-revisionist’ critics such as C. Vann Woodward, Norman Pollack, Michael Paul Rogin, Christopher Lasch, Walter Nugent and Lawrence Goodwyn. By 1991, the successes of this counter-offensive led Goodwyn to conclude that ‘the world of populism constructed by Hofstadter now languishes in ruin’ (cited in Ostler 1995: 2).

Even in 1991, however, Goodwyn already had to recognize an ambiguity which was to resurface in Müller's work. While the counter-revisionists had ostensibly won their campaign in historiography, the fate of Hofstadterian motifs outside of the American historical discipline was less clear cut. In the European and American social sciences, Hofstadter's theses even seemed to enjoy a spectral afterlife, consolidated in works on post-modern status politics and analyses of a new right in the 1980s and 1990s. These debates assured the entry of the term 'populism' into mainstream scholarly language by the close of the century. They also lay the foundations for 'populism studies' as Europeans – and others – know it today. As Goodwyn had to admit in 1991, both as a 'research strategy' and 'untested cultural hypothesis', a modified version of the Hofstadter thesis had survived intact (Canovan 1981; Mény and Surel 2002).

There is still comparatively little work on this legacy, particularly from the European side. Although Americanists have chronicled the career of Hofstadter's concepts in a more domestic setting, historians of the post-war and other social scientists have paid relatively scant attention to how his cluster of concepts – "small p" populism', 'status politics', 'the paranoid style', 'pseudo-conservatism' – crossed disciplinary boundaries and shaped literatures outside of its initial purview. European students of populism remain particularly vulnerable to this anxiety of influence. Continental students of populism may be aware of Hofstadter's oeuvre and his importance to a previous period, but they have done relatively little to track its effects on their own toolkits. They have also shown relatively little interest in how it conditions contemporary populism studies. As Müller's dilemma demonstrates, inserting these problems into a Hofstadterian frame can help clarify some of the field's current paradoxes and sharpen its sense of populist history.

This chapter tracks the reception of Hofstadter's thesis as a double process.¹ It begins with Hofstadter's usage of Weber's 'status' concept for his new explanation of the agrarian revolt of the 1890s, and how this reframed the roots of populist protest outside and within American historiography. The second part focuses on how his status concept translated into a new vision of 'populist' ideology, casting populism as hostile to intermediary bodies and wedded to rigidly majoritarian visions of democracy. It then focuses on how these theses found their counterpart in social-scientific work by pluralists such as Edward Shils, Daniel Bell and Seymour Martin Lipset, who usually inhabited the same professional milieu as Hofstadter at Columbia University. Unlike much previous work on Hofstadter's intellectual legacy, this chapter's aim is not solely to cast these actors as combatants in a protracted war between 'consensus' and 'conflict' history. Rather, it sees Hofstadter and colleagues contesting the status of nineteenth-century populism's 'usable past' for American politics and examines how this fed into debates on the American present – mainly the Cold War context in which it was launched. Hofstadter's work built a crucial pillar for Cold War liberalism and bequeathed the tradition with some of its most hallowed tropes – 'status anxiety', 'paranoid style', 'populism'. The most lasting of these legacies was his contribution to a specific post-war 'demonology' of the far right, taken up by more openly Cold War liberals such as Edward Shils and Daniel Bell. Although American populism as a movement had faded into oblivion, pluralists claimed its legacy still occupied a central place in American political culture and remained ready for reactivation. In this sense, Hofstadter's ambitions in his work on populism remained deeply presentist: although he knew it was 'risky', he 'still [wrote] history out of [his] engagement with the present' (cited in Brown 2008: 13). By the late 1960s, counter-revisionist pushback forced Hofstadter himself to review his previous commitments and to attenuate connections

between ‘big p’ Populism and ‘small p’ populism, reverting to a more conventional view of the Populists. But while counter-revisionists cornered Hofstadter’s reading within history, they increasingly despaired over its resilience in social science: through new channels, a modified version of the Hofstadter thesis seemed to survive intact and reproduce itself, consolidating an older, Cold War demonology, despite Hofstadter’s personal scepticism about Cold War liberalism. By the middle of the 1980s, the field of populism studies itself was diversifying into different schools and approaches, tracking the crises of European and American party democracy from the 1970s onwards. While not explicitly reliant on Hofstadter, most of the concepts in this new wave came out of the armoury built up by pluralists in the 1950s and 1960s. Hofstadter thus left a curious legacy: despite a growing diversity in the profession, his demonology of ‘small p’ populism continued to set contours for a global debate from 1980 onwards, culminating in Müller’s quandary.

HOFSTADTER IN CONTEXT

On the 11 May 1962, the American historian C. Vann Woodward sent a letter to a close friend of his. He wrote:

Dick, you just can’t do this. No amount of Adorno, Stouffer, Hartley, etc. will sustain it. If you mean by fundamentalists those addicted to ‘literal scanning of Scripture’ you take in a hell of a proportion of the population from the seventeenth down through the nineteenth centuries – including a hell of a lot of intellectuals, even some leading ones way down into the nineteenth century. I see several dangers here. (Woodward 2012 [1959]: 121)

The book under discussion – Richard Hofstadter’s *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, later published in early 1963 – might have had some ‘circumspect and cautious’ moments, but Woodward thought its overall tenor showed Hofstadter ‘let go with both barrels’ and overstep his bounds as a scholar. Above all, he felt that Hofstadter’s criticisms of the original Populist movement – a collection of radical farmers’ associations that arose in the 1880s and 1890s in the Midwest and the South that later sorted itself into a party – were unduly strong and vituperative. Hofstadter saw them as assailants of academic freedom and critical consciousness. As Woodward noted in an earlier assessment of his friend’s work, such ‘uncritical repetition and occasional exaggeration’ threatened ‘to result in establishing a new maxim in American political thought: *Radix malorum est Populismus*’ (Woodward 1960: 147).

It was not the first time that Woodward found himself in disagreement with Hofstadter over the populist question. In 1955, the latter had launched his full-scale revisionist account of the Populist movement in his book *The Age of Reform*, followed by a critical essay in an edited volume with Daniel Bell (Hofstadter 1963b). Hofstadter’s assessment of the Populists was a self-conscious break with previous scholarly habits. In the 1920s and 1930s, American historians still tended to look back on populism with an explicit sense of fondness, granting it a prime place in their republican histories. To Charles A. Beard, doyen of the Progressive School, for instance, populism represented the final revolt of the small freeholding class before its crushing by industrial society; a valiant last stand against a triumphant corporate order (Barrow 2000). Other writers in this tradition, like Vernon Parrington, Solon Buck or John Hicks, usually shared Beard’s sentiment. Parrington’s last volume of his tripartite *Main Currents in American Thought* (1930), for instance, casts populism as a revolt of small

property holders wielding the Jeffersonian ideal, claiming a tradition which went back to the Founders' Age and Jacksonian democracy. As Gary Marotta notes, these visions saw the Populist movement 'as evidence of a salutary and democratic agrarian resistance to capitalist exploitation' (Marotta 2016: 106). John D. Hicks' classic *The Populist Revolt* (1931) tracked a similar genealogy, in which the historian demonstrated how the aims of the original Populists were transposed into progressivism and the early radicalism of the New Deal. 'Thanks to the triumph of Populist principles', Hicks confidently declared in 1931, 'one may almost say that [...] the people now rule' (Hicks 1931: 421).

Hofstadter's thesis worked corrosively on all these visions. To him, the agrarian rebels were not simply benevolent reformists or crypto-socialists, but rather the unwitting forebears of a 'paranoid style in American politics' (Hofstadter 1964). In his *Age of Reform*, Hofstadter drew a sharp contrast between the populist 'Agrarian Myth' and the 'Commercial Realities' of the late nineteenth century. In Hofstadter's view, farmers sought the benefits of a new capitalist economy but still postured as pastoral victims of a 'conspiracy hatched in the distance'. The rise of the corporation destabilized prior notions of citizenship and uprooted older Jeffersonian ideals of small property holding. Large Atlantic trading routes meant that farmers became subject to impersonal market forces and dependent on new financial mediators. Hofstadter's move thus pulled the Populists out of a previous exceptionalist frame, which saw the crisis of the American farmer as uniquely national and sectional. Instead, *The Age of Reform* recast populism as part of the global glut in farming prices of the 1870s and 1880s in the Long Depression. Rather than innocent victims of economic distress, the Populists became the logical outcome of American ideals crashing into new financial realities. Out of this feeling of frustration, a new anti-Semitism and older Anglophobia emerged. As Hofstadter put it:

Rank in society! That was close to the heart of the matter, for the farmer was beginning to realize acutely not merely that the best of the world's goods were to be had in the cities and that the urban middle and upper classes had much more of them than he did but also that he was losing in status and respect as compared with them. (Hofstadter 1955: 33)

Always a consciously public historian, Hofstadter's combination of sociological and historical registers was also at one with the profession's mood in the 1950s. This decade was characterized by the entry of various new methodologies, in which classical genres of literary history were being enriched by new sociological methods – a fusion which tended to produce, as Dorothy Ross put it, 'social theories rather than political narratives' and led to a decline in explanations centred on 'interest' or 'class' (Ross 2018: 85). In an introduction to a 1968 collection on *Sociology and History*, for instance, Hofstadter looked back on this era as that of a new 'analytical history' with greater 'sociological awareness' and a more 'complex conceptual task' (Hofstadter 1968: 15). Rather than sticking to notions of 'interest' or 'class', *The Age of Reform* imported new psychoanalytic and sociological categories such as 'status' and 'frustration' into American historiography.

Only a year after *The Age of Reform*, Hofstadter and other pluralists gathered these critiques in a collection named *The New American Right*. Under the editorship of Daniel Bell, the work was prepared in prior meetings in the 'Seminar on the State' at Columbia University and became a classic in transatlantic far right studies (as Bell noted in a preface to the 1964 edition, the 'idea for the original edition of this volume' arose in 1954 in 'a faculty seminar on political behavior, at Columbia University' where participants there agreed that 'standard explanations of American political behavior in terms of economic-interest-group conflict or the role of the

electoral structure were inadequate to the task' (Bell 1963: xi). Instead, the Weberian tools deployed by Hofstadter and Bell, conceived from a 'historian's vantage point', seemed more useful.

Stricto sensu only two contributions to *The New American Right* explicitly drew a connection between late nineteenth-century American populism and McCarthyism – Peter Viereck and Richard Hofstadter's chapters on 'pseudo-conservatism' and the new 'unadjusted men'. 'When real economic-interest-group issues were lacking', Hofstadter claimed, 'a psychological or status dimension' informed calls for direct participation and anti-bureaucracy and a 'peculiar scramble for status' and 'search for secure identity' (Hofstadter 1963b: 69). 'This outburst of direct democracy', Viereck noted, 'comes straight from the leftist rhetoric of the old Populists' (Viereck 1955: 91). Hofstadter's theory of populism here was only a pitched version of this far more general theme in 1950s social science. In political science and political sociology, writers such as David Merton and Robert Dahl had applied the 'populist' label to Jefferson and Paine, emphasizing their plebiscitary leanings. Political scientist Victor Ferkiss, in turn, claimed to have found a direct link between American populism and the fascism of the 1930s. In its 'hatred of social democracy and socialism, the belief that representative democracy is a mask for rule by a predatory economic plutocracy' and the 'peculiar interpretation of history which sees in events a working-out of a dialectic which opposes the financier and the producer', Ferkiss claimed, fascists and populists explicitly joined hands (Ferkiss 1957: 367).

The most sophisticated version of the status thesis was put forward by Chicago sociologist Edward Shils. Shils had been a colleague of Bell at the University of Chicago before the latter moved to Columbia in the early 1950s. He had also been close to the New York Intellectuals in the 1930s, varyingly described as both 'at a distance' and 'a cousin' by Bell. Their intellectual affinity was clear, however, and they shared a suspicion of populism. Shils first presented this argument at a University of Chicago conference on 'Populism and the Rule of Law', attended by Dahl and Lipset. The architecture for Shils' argument was set in the 1930s, when he 'studied Max Weber's views about charismatic authority over and over again' but only saw 'their potentials for extension... until about twenty-five years later' (Shils 1982: xviii). Shils' notion of populism was both more specific and flexible than Hofstadter and Bell's. In *The Torment of Secrecy* (1956), Shils detected traces of a 'populist' mentality in both communism and fascism, echoing the 'vital centre' trope expounded by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. in the 1940s. But Shils' populists also shared a specifically anti-bureaucratic philosophy. They emphasized the importance of direct plebiscites for popular power and were hostile to mediators placed between individuals and the state. The historical implications of this attitude were not always clear; in the end, Shils clarified that his was a populism 'not just... in the specific historical meaning, although that was an instance of the species' (Shils 1954: 160).

THE BACKLASH

Opposition to Hofstadter's thesis took off from within historiography. Although John Hicks had initially celebrated Hofstadter's achievements, he later castigated his performance as a caricature and claimed Hofstadter's base in New York made him unfit as a commentator. 'His background', he wrote to a student of his, was 'quite inadequate for any reasonable understanding of Populism' (Hicks 1955: 12). The most elaborate response came from Hofstadter's confidants such as C. Vann Woodward, however, who pushed back against his reading in

a series of essays and personal letters. Woodward's first book had been a biography of the Georgia Populist Thomas E. Watson (published in 1938), based on a prior doctoral dissertation, while his 1951 work on the New South emphasized the key role taken up by populism in the years from 1880 to 1910. Both books also spoke about the 'hopeful contingency' of the Populist project, mainly in the South. 'I wonder', Woodward contended in a 1959 letter to Hofstadter discussing his earlier work and the theses of *The Radical Right*:

about the usefulness of retaining either 'Populism' or 'populism' as the designation of what we are talking about... Isn't what we are talking about in the case of 'small-p' populism the ancient fallacies of the democratic dogma, its tendency to glorify the masses, to bow before the majority, to minimize the importance of liberty, to give short shrift to minorities, to undervalue excellence, to override dissent, to sacrifice everything (including reality) for the sake of unanimity. What you aptly called 'the utopian diffusion of social decision'. (Woodward 2012 [1959]: 741)

Woodward's most explicit response to Hofstadter came with a 1959 essay in *The American Scholar*. Here, he pushed back against Hofstadter's contention that populist farmers had exaggerated the severity of their economic lot. An aetiology of populist agitation, he claimed, would reveal the very real drop in grain and cotton prices that occurred in the 1880s and subsequent destitution in agrarian sectors. 'The Populists may have been bitten by status anxieties', he wrote, 'but if so, they were certainly not bred of upward social mobility, and probably few by downward mobility'. Original populism thus was hardly 'status politics', nor was it a form of 'class politics' in a Marxist sense. He also urged interlocutors to displace their focus northward and upward: scholars had to focus on Midwestern, elite enthusiasm for McCarthy – not the mass politics of Louisiana governor Huey Long or the radio gospels of Charles Coughlin – and give up on the notion that the senator from Wisconsin had enjoyed any grass-roots support. He also singled out the portrait of 'populism' painted by Shils, Bell and Lipset. Programmes such as the sub-treasury or reflationary monetary policy, he continued, attested to a deep realism within populism: farmers went to great lengths to specify proposals and shunned empty acclamations of a homogeneous 'farmer's interest'. Their 'legislative program', Woodward claimed, was 'almost obsessively economic and, as political platforms go, little more irrational than the run of the mill'. Against Shils' equation of populism with plebiscites, Woodward also saw populists as staunch defenders of a parliamentary road to reform (Woodward 1960: 147–154).

The fiercest response to the Hofstadter thesis came from a younger generation of scholars, however, foremost amongst which was the Harvard graduate Norman Pollack. Pollack's own book on the movement, *The Populist Response to Industrial America* (1962), had appeared three years earlier, and formed a riposte to tendencies within American historiography which sought to 'denigrate' the nineteenth-century populists as backward-looking, status-ridden and, worst of all, anti-Semitic (Pollack 1967). Writing in 1965, Pollack stated that 'the last decade and a half [has] witnessed the unwarranted denigration of Populism, and because Populism has served as the type-form of radicalism, we have seen the unwarranted denigration of the reform tradition in America as well' (Pollack 1965: 7–14). This was followed up by a 1962 response from Walter T. Nugent, a young doctoral candidate from Kansas, whose *The Tolerant Populists* (1963) sought to revise the literature's 'apparent overgeneralizations' (Nugent 1963). The most explicitly social-scientific response to the Hofstadter thesis came from Berkeley political scientist Michael Paul Rogin. *The Radical Specter* provided a chronol-

ogy of the original revisionist debate, but swiftly moved to a more thorough deconstruction of the social-scientific arguments put forward by pluralists in the 1950s (Rogin 1967).

A 1959 exchange of letters between Hofstadter and Woodward had already touched upon similar questions. The former had taken a closer look at Woodward's critique in *The American Scholar* and came up with responses, trying to salvage something from what he himself saw as a 'very cogently' put case (Hofstadter 1955: n.p.). 'I suppose we all ought to speak simply of Populism of the 90's and of populism, with no capital, when we refer to a style of thought that can be found in anti-Masonry [sic], Jacksonian democracy, the Greenback-Populist-Bryan tradition, and many aspects of Progressivism and the New Deal'. Still, he insisted, Woodward had misunderstood the broader ambitions of the book. 'What is involved', he retorted, 'is not simply a particular agrarian movement but the general character of American democratic sentiment and ideology'. Hofstadter here returned to Shils, who had argued that the 'Populists of the 90's were actually an optimal variation of populism, just as the radical right might be held to be a pessimal variation (if there's any such word)' (1955: n.p.). Although no longer viable as a general metonym, Hofstadter's 'small p' populism could still be salvaged as a cultural type.

Hofstadter also conceded that conspiracy thinking had hardly been an exclusively populist prerogative in the 1890s. But he still believed the People's Party offered an ideal variant of the tendency he had analysed. 'I seriously doubt', he claimed, 'that this would hold up under investigation' and 'one or two swallows don't make a summer' (Woodward underlined this sentence in the correspondence, adding several question marks in the marginalia). Populists had been particularly conspiratorist since 'conspiratorial themes' were 'most congenial to people who are a) not highly educated and b) rather severely shut off from all access to power, and c) suffering from what feel as intense grievances that they really can't come to grips with'. Yet the letter also spoke to an increasing sense of unease about *The Age of Reform's* reception. 'I'd hate to see anybody get his ideas of the Pops from the book alone... this is what is wrong with just writing essays instead of full-fledged histories' (1955: n.p.).

These were rather modest retractions, and Woodward thought so too. In a response he charged that Hofstadter had left 'unsettled' the question 'about the terminology for tendencies common to popular movements as early as Jackson (and earlier) and as late as McCarthyism' (Woodward 2012 [1959]: n.p.). The term 'quasi-populism' could have helped here, but again proved insufficient; there was real programmatic content to the populist movements, not simply rhetoric. What then of the previous accusations of irrationalism and 'status anxiety' levelled at populists? 'You have an initial advantage here', Woodward admitted, for he had to 'concede on the outset that the unlettered, the inexperienced, the unsophisticated, and the disinherited are more likely to fall for the oversimplifications of conspiratorial ideology than are the educated, the competent the privileged' (2012 [1959]: n.p.). Hofstadter returned to the question for a last time in a letter on 30 May 1959, settling for a truce with Woodward. 'Let us say', he concluded, 'that both sides under stress are prone to distort reality (arent [sic] we all?), but that the tendency to believe that things are being run by gigantic conspiracies is a distinctively populist vice'. 'I still incline', he nonetheless concluded, 'to think that... the conservative type and the populist type respond ideologically to tension differ from each other'.

Hofstadter made an even more public retraction of his thesis at a 1967 conference at the London School of Economics. Organized by Ernest Gellner and Ghiță Ionescu, the conference enjoyed a stellar line up with Isaiah Berlin, Leonard Schapiro and Hofstadter adorning the list of speakers (Worsley 1969). Papers on the topic of 'populism' were distributed beforehand (Berlin 1968). Chairman Schapiro – himself based at the London School of Economics –

described the conference as a 'work of instant research'. After delegating tasks, Schapiro proposed three questions which were to serve as a guideline for discussions: 'What is and what is not populist ideology?', 'Why is populism a political movement and yet does it not usually crystallise in political parties?' and, finally, 'What are the differences between the populism of before the First World War and after the Second World War?' (London School of Economics and Political Science 1967: 1).

From the outset, participants could be divided into two camps on how to classify the terms 'populism' or 'populist'. One side proposed a particularistic reading: it was an ideology that pertained to specific movements which could *not* be grouped under one coherent rubric (termed 'localists' by one of the conveners, the social scientist Peter Worsley). These localists were opposed to those seeking a more conclusive settlement ('universalists', as Worsley named them). Heavily influenced by recent studies in modernization theory, these contributors cast populism as the ideology of regimes in transition which did not live up to classical patterns of social change. In doing so, they had 'failed' to integrate their masses into civil society.

Scholars on the other side of the Atlantic only hesitantly joined this debate. Hofstadter himself was slightly dazzled by the wide range of movements discussed under his rubric. He opened his plenary remarks stating that he expected a conference discussing only two types, either its Russian or American form. Responding to earlier critiques, he now conceded that the 'genetic affiliation' between McCarthyism and 'earlier agrarian movements' was 'doubtless miscarried'. Even if McCarthy and 'paranoid-style' exponents did 'twang some populist strings', they now no longer qualified for the status of big p 'Populists', and had an ancillary connection to the original. This was a remarkable retreat from the position he had espoused in 1955. Still, Hofstadter insisted on the persistence of 'small-p populist' themes in the American tradition, claiming that certain 'populist' leaders within the Civil Rights Movement drew on the 'serious trauma about identity' of the African American population. He also urged other participants, who seemed to be looking for more general frames, to adopt a more local focus.

Hofstadter's warnings were echoed by some other participants. 'We have to be aware', Canadian political scientist Neil Macfarlane warned, 'of the danger of giving populism a label which can apply to everything, so that we have to spend all our time trying to find different brands of populism, just as there are different brands of soap powder in the shops'. Isaiah Berlin closed the conference with an admonition against a so-called 'Cinderella Complex'. 'There exists a shoe', he claimed – 'the word 'populism' – 'for which somewhere there must exist a foot... There are all kinds of feet which it nearly fits, but we must not be trapped by these nearly fitting feet'.

This search for 'fitting feet' remained visible in the monograph that came out of the London conference. *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics* was published by Ernest Gellner and Ghiță Ionescu in 1969. The bulk of chapters were drafted by contributors to the conference. Hofstadter, for instance, was commissioned for a section on North America, while Ionescu handled Eastern Europe and Worsley discussed populism as a 'concept'. The North American chapter showed the historian in a distinctly cautious mode. Fewer references to the work of money theorist William 'Coin' Harvey were inserted (although it still counted as the 'great document of the populist movement'). Instead, Hofstadter preferred books by more recognizably populist writers such as William Peffer and James B. Weaver, explicit affiliates of the party.

Some sensitive parameters had clearly shifted. While Hofstadter re-emphasized the schizophrenia of his Gilded Age farmer – who experienced, in his words, 'an inner tension

between the optimism, so indigenously American' and 'the curiously co-existent sense of near impotence in the face... of an almost omniscient enemy' – he was careful not to overstate populism's influence on later conspiratorial currents (Hofstadter 1969: 9–27).

The results of Hofstadter's intervention were also met with American responses. One of these came from Theodore Saloutos, who had collaborated with John Hicks in the 1950s and launched some of the first counter-revisionist attacks in the 1960s (Saloutos 1970). In a 1970 review, Saloutos deemed the conference a unilateral failure. 'Why two editors', he wondered, 'should attempt anything as sweeping and premature as this study defies explanation'. 'The inability of the writers', he decried, 'to come up with any acceptable definition of populism simply confounds the reader'. What remained was a 'maze of phraseologies', due to an unwillingness to do 'the necessary empirical digging'. Although the idea behind the book 'had merit', he claimed:

[the] limited and superficial treatment given to sweeping topics hardly does justice to them, the collaborators, and the publishers. The term 'populism' is misused and abused, in the opinion of the reviewer; setting up a qualified definition of it would have given the volume a sense of cohesion. But as it now stands it lacks focus, it is amorphous and cluttered with a mass of undigested data that prompt one to label it a serious mistake. And even this is a charitable evaluation. (Saloutos 1970: 329)

This confusion was only amplified by Hofstadter's own contribution to the volume. Instead of defending his erstwhile 1955 position on populism, he had reverted to a more classical Hicksian reading of the Populists as ambiguous reformists. 'Those who know his analysis of populism in the *Age of Reform*', Saloutos stated, 'probably will be baffled by his presentation, for it is a reversion to a more traditional approach'. 'Why such a shift', he claimed, 'is not clear. Certainly it was not one of convenience' (Saloutos 1970: 328–329).

Saloutos' statement indicated just how far the debate on American 'big p' Populism had drifted away from its previous social-scientific partners. In the languages of the global political sciences, 'populism' had now become the general metonym for an anomic disaffection with intermediary bodies. Contrary to expectation, however, the heritage of the London conference remained positively ambiguous – a fact corroborated by later reliance on Gellner and Ionescu's monograph. Despite Peter Worsley's reminder that ascriptions of 'populism' to specific movements were by no means 'self-evidently justifiable', the link established between the concept and a whole range of phenomena would prove hard to sever. During the 1970s, a 'populist nihilism' was creeping into social science debates, with an increasing number of researchers now calling for a moratorium on the term (Laclau 1977). Yet these warnings could hardly halt its rise. In Europe, Bell, Shils and Hofstadter's concept steadily shed its roots in American historiography and drifted into other disciplines. Here was the silent victory of the revisionist generation – a concept still deemed too unstable for political analysis in the early 1970s was now cosily nestling itself into European jargon.

Lipset and Parsons' 'social strain theory' – a modified version of the status thesis – also made headway in French, Belgian and German debates in the 1980s and 1990s. Michael Minkenberg's work on the post-1989 German right relied on Bell's meritocratic 'status frame' (Minkenberg 1998). The most explicit transfer of this thesis, however, was Hans-Georg Betz's *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe* in 1994, a landmark in European far-right studies (Betz 1994). Drawing on Bell's notion of a 1970s 'status revolution', Betz saw how the 'rapid pace of technological innovation and modernization' had made education 'a central determinant of social position'. This situation led to a natural upsurge in populism, where calls

for direct representation and participation were made by new far-right parties. Doyens of the profession such as Cas Mudde, Pippa Norris and Hanspeter Kriesi all acknowledged Betz's influence (Turner 1983). It also cemented an understanding of populism as a diffuse notion of 'status' politics, in which contests over redistribution, circulation and production had been replaced by a new fight over symbolism, culture and identity.

Two main components of the Hofstadter thesis at the beginning thus survived intact. Populism was defined as a form of 'post-materialist' status politics, spurred by the increasing stratification of Western voters into lower- and higher-educated blocs. Because of the latter's overrepresentation in parliaments and parties, the new 'losers of globalization' (*Globalisierungsverlierer*) became obsessed with the need for direct participation and turned to charismatic leadership as a substitute for class voting. As Betz noted, Populist parties were fundamentally 'parties of discontent, which managed to exploit voters' dissatisfaction and cynicism and to appeal to their sense of powerlessness by promoting authoritarian leadership' (Betz 1994: 38). Betz's book was only one of the many tracts in the 'populism boom' of the 1990s. In subsequent years the term also found its way into Italian commentary on Berlusconi, electoral analysis of the rising Flemish Vlaams Blok and investigation of the rising Republikaner Party in Germany. McCarthyism rarely figured prominently in these stories, although many European scholars continued to rely on pluralist vocabularies and references to Bell and Lipset were ubiquitous. 'Status' was gradually replaced by 'culture', while Shils' emphasis on the 'plebiscite' made way for a literature on 'direct representation' and the 'general will'.

Europe's burgeoning populism literature also led to some conceptual soul-searching. Scholars such as Pierre-André Taguieff, Cas Mudde and Paul Taggart looked back at the first movements that claimed the 'populist' mantle to excavate the origins of the term. They also recognized its roots in the heated debates of the 1950s (Mudde 2004). Often enough, this implied slotting the original American Populist movement into transhistorical portraits. What did they have in common with the latter-day conservatives and radical rightists of Europe today? How could these be put in a comparative frame?

As anti-revisionist writers such as Woodward, Pollack and McMath reminded their American readers, it was unclear whether these European portraits really did justice to the original. The original Populists in the 1890s were wary of referendums except on tactical occasions. They rarely endorsed direct democratic measures. Their reverence for the constitution was constant, as was their prevarication for legislatures. As Charles Postel notes, 'far from being "anti-pluralists"', the original Populists were 'committed to a representative electoral system' and provided 'models of transparent, law based, and equitable administration', which sought to 'professionalize law enforcement and break the grip of party rings over policing' to protect 'the franchise among African Americans and the poor' (Postel 2019: 6). Such a reading largely puts them at odds with contemporary populists who centre on executive authority and restrict associative rights. Economic historians have also continued to insist on the economic woes that addled the original Populists and the 'economistic' nature of their demands. The populists' emphasis on 'association' makes them an outlier to a populism literature which increasingly studies movements enacting a 'revolt against intermediary bodies' (Urbinati 2015, 2000). All these characteristics make American populism a black swan event to the scheme set up by pluralists in the 1950s – as Postel notes, 'none of [the] archival research has sustained the Hofstadter thesis' in history and has even 'left it in ruins' (Postel 2019: 6). So

why do contemporary scholars continue to see original Populists as populists? Or, why do they insist on calling ‘populist’ certain phenomena so far from the original?

CONCLUSION

Some recent writers are keenly aware of Postel’s complaint. One of the most prominent proponents of a new Cold War liberal synthesis, Jan-Werner Müller, justified his claim that ‘big p’ Populists do not qualify for his ‘small p’ category because the Populists ‘defended the interests of the common people without... speaking for the people as a whole’ (Müller 2016: 91). They did so ‘by uniting women, men and people of colour like no party at the time’. Aware of the pluralist treatment of the term, Müller also cautions contemporary scholars against purely ‘psychologistic’ readings of the phenomenon. In his eyes, populism should not be seen as the emanation of individual pathologies; rather, it needs to be understood as a movement with an ideology and saliency of its own. This implies distancing populism studies from its pluralist forebears and the ‘originality trap’ which led Hofstadter to overstate his claims.

Müller’s own definition is also uncomfortably close to his pluralist opponents, however, partly owing to his own Cold War sensibility. *What Is Populism?* sees populism as an ‘anti-pluralist identity politics’, with a particularly ‘moralistic’ conception of political conflict. Like Shils and Bell, Müller’s populism is a ‘loose ideology’ opposed to mediating institutions such as parties, unions and parliaments. Although not necessarily anti-constitutional – certain forms of ‘monistic’ constitutions are deployed by populists – populism is nonetheless wary of institutional checks on majority will, obsessed with ‘direct representation’. Like Bell’s work on meritocracy, Müller’s populism is also the result of new educational divisions, pitting ‘globalists’ against ‘nationalists’, opposing mobile middle classes to working classes tied to national states. Contemporary populists also lack a distinct theory of ‘interests’, preferring a ‘politics of identity’ over a ‘politics of issues’ (Müller 2016: 27–28).

All this steadily pushes Müller into a quandary. Familiarity with the rich counter-revisionist literature leads him to reject a portrait of the ‘big p’ Populists as anti-pluralists, resisting Hofstadter’s manoeuvre. Yet Müller is also aware that the Populists themselves invented the word ‘populism’; and that American scholars also continue to see the late nineteenth-century Populists as predecessors of a ‘small p’ populist tradition worthy of retrieval. Müller decides to bite the bullet: ‘the party in US history that explicitly called itself “populist” is, in fact, not populist’ (Müller 2016: 85).

Müller’s statement incarnates the ironies of the populism debate that grew out of the revisionist conversation kickstarted by Hofstadter in the 1950s. This began with a discussion in American historiography and mutated into an aggressively expanding literature on the European side of the Atlantic. It then shot into different directions: radical-right studies, Europe’s declining party democracy, post-materialism and the global crisis of representation. The resulting body of work has proven both hugely unstable and productive, informing a wide gamut of approaches to the phenomenon we now recognize as ‘populism’. Against Woodward and other counter-revisionists, scholars need not feel pressured to excommunicate the term from our vocabulary due to its original, Hofstadterian sin – nor does this detract from the quality of the work on populism produced since the 1990s. Yet the fact that the very actors who coined the term in the early 1890s do not meet the criteria for Müller’s definition may also give us some pause for thought – and help ‘return populism to history’ (Finchelstein 2014).

NOTE

1. This chapter draws on an article in *History of Political Thought* in March 2023.

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11. Margaret Canovan, populist gadfly

Paris Aslanidis¹

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Canovan's early monograph *Populism* (1981) and her penultimate book *The People* (2005) bookend a series of essential texts for students of populism. Deservedly, the late English scholar has been dubbed the 'intellectual doyenne of contemporary populism studies' (Mudde 2021: 580). However, a paradox complicates her enduring legacy: while we contend to be intimately familiar with Canovan the academic, we know embarrassingly little about Canovan the person.

To be sure, our doyenne did not invite close inspection. She was a reserved individual who avoided travel and rarely attended conferences; she taught and wrote alone (her single co-authored piece out of 103 publications was with her husband); she advised only one doctoral student in her long academic career; and she never gave any interviews or contributed to non-academic outlets. But even our understanding of her work itself is shown to be incomplete, once we look closely at her full roster of publications; much as we like to claim her as our own, Canovan's interest in populism was more of a sideshow. Her contributions to our field were eclipsed by a steady stream of publications on the topic of political legitimacy. Margaret Canovan was first and foremost a historian of political thought with a specialization in the philosophy of Hannah Arendt.

My thesis is that our partial familiarity with Canovan's writings, combined with our ignorance of her personal circumstances, has engendered a fundamental misreading of her political worldview and her stance on the populist question. The basic misconception I wish to challenge is that of Canovan as a liberal-minded scholar, a cerebral centrist who marches without a flag in a non-confrontational attempt to define populism and to negotiate its relationship to democracy. Canovan's purported impartiality and agreeableness – not your typically crude anti-populist, yet 'by no means an apologist for populism' (Panizza and Miorelli 2009: 40) – has permitted liberal and left-wing students of populism (and even the few conservatives among us) to commend her wisdom in equal measure. Yet, this image is a distortion of who Canovan really was.

Based on a close reading of her entire work and five interviews conducted with former colleagues, students and a family member, I reveal Canovan as a distinctly conservative thinker, a passionate polemicist and an iconoclastic contrarian. Fierce critic of progressive liberalism and castigator of intellectual orthodoxy and ideological vanguardism, Canovan was, moreover, a staunch defender of the nation-state in the global order. However, I will argue that the conservative label does not do her full justice. Canovan should best be remembered as an irreverent populist gadfly that enjoyed poking holes in lofty academic theories to ultimately goad her utopian peers out of the Ivory Tower and into the real world, where the common people dwell.

FAMILY, WORK AND POLITICAL ACTION

Margaret Evelyn Leslie was born on 25 April 1939 in Carlisle, England, to a family of traditional Conservatives. Her mother was a housekeeper; her father owned a small business that cultivated and sold garden products. Margaret was a prodigy and a first-generation college student. She graduated from Cambridge University's Girton College with a degree in history and subsequently earned a PhD for her doctoral thesis on the famous English chemist and theologian Joseph Priestley. Her first teaching post was at Lancaster University in 1964 but after marrying James Canovan she resigned in 1971 to look after their newborn daughter. Having changed her surname to Canovan, she returned to academia in 1974 as a lecturer at Keele University. She retired in 2002 and subsequently moved with her husband to Gatehouse of Fleet, a small town in Scotland, where she spent her final years tending her garden, learning Greek and memorizing nineteenth-century poetry. Margaret Canovan passed away on 16 June 2018 at Kirkcudbright Hospital.

Canovan's professional breakthrough came in 1974 with the publication of *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* by the prestigious Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Arendtian philosophy remained Canovan's main academic passion through two books and over 30 articles and book chapters.² Her second lifelong fascination was G. K. Chesterton, the controversial English essayist and subject of Canovan's (1977a) monograph and several articles. Other notable influences on her intellectual and ideological development were Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Joseph Priestley, Edmund Burke and Michael Oakeshott. Her heroes were passionate dissenters of one stripe or another, brave polemicists of a certain conservative bent and often mavericks or pariahs according to their foes. Tellingly, Canovan had no trouble associating them with populism: the early Arendt had an 'authentically populist ring' (2002: 409); Rousseau was the 'original hippy' (1990a: 12) and the 'wayward populist' (1981: 217); Burke's conservatism had 'some populist elements' (1981: 332, ft. 100); and, of course, Chesterton would forever remain her favourite 'radical populist' (Canovan 1977a).

Canovan's populist proclivities are already obvious in *G. K. Chesterton: Radical Populist* (1977a). For Canovan, Chesterton represents that radical democratic lineage in English politics that goes back to William Cobbett, the Chartists, the Levellers and even the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. 'At its heart', she remarks, 'lies always a faith in the common sense of ordinary, hard-working people, especially country people, and an intense suspicion of metropolitan society, plutocrats, bureaucrats, and intellectuals' (1977a: 5–6). In *Populism* (1981), Canovan famously singles out and defends the sub-category of 'populist democracy', heaping praise on the Swiss direct democratic model. She also addresses the issue of her own populism directly in an awkwardly worded footnote: 'It may be appropriate here to declare a personal bias', she writes; 'The author (no doubt given a shove by the *Zeitgeist*) leans slightly in the populist direction: but this antielitist preference is countered (and balanced?) by a marked distrust of any form of romanticism, populist as well as elitist' (1981: 303, ft. 12). Canovan's sympathy for populism was definitely not of the romantic sort. On the contrary, it was experiential, sober and qualified. But what sort of *Zeitgeist* was powerful enough to compel an up-and-coming scholar in her early 40s to move in a populist direction?

For the answer, we must look to the late 1950s, where we find Canovan participating in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), where her closest friend, fellow Arendtian and Lancaster peer, April Carter, was an important member.³ Canovan refrained from the annual Aldermaston March and other acts of civil disobedience for which the CND and its affiliates

became famous, but she remained a committed pacifist and a supporter of grassroots political participation. The participationist zeitgeist that spilled into the next couple of decades fit Canovan's distaste for institutionalized party politics and their backroom dealings, a theme that pervades her work.⁴ But, like many others, Canovan soon became disillusioned with the utopian belief in the transformative powers of reason and deliberation. Decades later, in her unrelenting critique against Jürgen Habermas and his followers, she would still caution that 'Rational discussion, alas, does not lead to progress, at any rate in politics' (1990b: 176).

In any case, while fully aware of the dangers of political manipulation, Canovan was not as fearful of grassroots mobilization as most conservatives and liberals turned out to be during the Cold War. On the contrary, she derided liberal intellectuals who 'shudder and reach for their theories of mass society' (1981: 293) whenever the people of a non-canonical popular movement voice their grievances. In England, she would joke, 'there has never been any need to take elaborate precautions against rule by the man in the pub, because there has never been the slightest danger of anything so democratic' (1977a: 78). For Canovan, the people in action, coming together in earnest, unhampered by ideology and freed from the burden of adhering to political blueprints, was a rare but admirable phenomenon, one that could bestow or restore democratic legitimacy to a polity, thereby reinforcing the republican tradition. Her belief in this form of grassroots populism was in line with Arendt's philosophy of action that celebrated political mobilization in the form of independent action by men as free agents, meeting as equals in the public arena in a spontaneous and contingent manner. However, unlike Canovan, Arendtian thought was fraught with elitist elements. Canovan saw in this the paradox of Arendt's populism: 'while she welcomed direct action by the people, she also feared and deplored almost all actual cases of grassroots mobilization' (2002: 403). Popular authority, Canovan agreed, 'is more often potential than actual' but therein, she insisted, lies its beauty, as it keeps 'haunting the political imagination and tempting political entrepreneurs but exasperating tidy-minded students of politics' (2005: 9). Nevertheless, Canovan's conspicuous populist impulses were policed by a markedly conservative mindset.

CANOVAN AS A CONSERVATIVE THINKER: AGAINST PROGRESSIVES AND VANGUARDISTS

It is well known that Arendt harboured no love for the notion of progress in Marxist and liberal thought. Canovan was of the same mind. They both abhorred philosophies of history that celebrate progress as an inexorable and inherently beneficial force. The experience of war left them no doubt that a blind belief in progress is a dangerous utopia: 'The most damaging blows to the liberal belief in the progress of enlightenment have been pragmatic ones', Canovan observed; with 'two world wars, totalitarianism, revolution, and the general predominance of bad governments over good, it is hard to share the optimism, and easy to see the unsupported assumptions upon which it rested' (1978: 39). Twenty years later she still sounded the same trumpet: 'Looking back from the disillusioned vantage point of the late twentieth century', she noted wryly, 'we need an effort of imagination to recover that sanguine faith in progress' (1999a: 243).

Canovan's anti-progressivism fuelled an intense hostility against vanguardist inclinations by high-handed elites across the ideological board. For her, the real political scoundrel was the idealist who concocts utopian projects of reform and then foists them upon a grudging

populace in the name of science and expertise: ‘If the fashionable radicalism of the 1930s was Communism’, she argued:

the idealistic liberalism that dominated Western policies after World War II was no less committed to an elitist conception of progress, with vanguards of scientific and technical experts trying to extend the blessings of development all over the world. The initial reaction against this form of liberalism, the New Left, was if anything more frankly elitist than old style proletarian Marxism, and was just as oriented toward progress. (1977a: 147)

G. K. Chesterton contributed greatly to Canovan’s distaste for zealots. She admired his ‘cool evaluation of “progress” in terms of its impact on the common man’ (1977a: 10) and believed that Western opinion after the 1960s vindicated Chesterton’s populist ideals. The desirability of progress was widely questioned, the environmental consequences of industrialization – ‘the great awakening of recent years’ (1977a: 148) – were more salient than ever and the movement for self-sufficiency had a growing base of supporters. The villains for Chesterton and Canovan were the paternalistic elite, be they liberal, socialist or (more rarely) conservative. ‘The whole liberal-scientific-progressive package, in fact – in spite of its close historical links with movements for democratic reform – had an inescapably elitist and antipopulist slant’, Canovan would claim, adding sarcastically: ‘In the nature of things, if we are all progressing toward truth, some of us must be in front’ (1981: 238).

Canovan did not mince her words when it came to her peers in academia. Her irreverent and unpopular opinions may have contributed to the underappreciation of her work among mainstream philosophers, but – as her former colleagues still attest today – she genuinely had no patience for liberal doctrinaires and was willing to suffer the consequences.⁵ Like Arendt, she could not stand ‘woolly liberals who view the world through rose-tinted spectacles’ or what she called ‘the sentimental delusions characteristic of modern liberals (and particularly of modern American liberals)’ (1999b: 175). And with Arendt, she criticized the belief among theorists that if a scheme is theoretically sound then it should be applied to reform the politics of the real world: ‘The mistake intellectuals constantly make’, Canovan laid against her academic brethren, ‘is to suppose that the rest of mankind also dwell in the realm of ideas’ (1984a: 334). We must rule out, she declared forcefully, ‘any style of political thinking which first decides what the world should be like and then sets out to realise this ideal’ (1983: 300).

Canovan – revealing the humanistic spirit of her populism – would invariably contrast progressive single-mindedness with the common sense of the average person: ‘it is not safe to assume’, she claimed, ‘that the ideas for which advanced minorities are willing to fight against popular inertia are necessarily humane. The most “progressive” ideas of the day are, on occasion, more barbarous than mere popular prejudice’ (1981: 256). She was convinced that a populist distrust of intellectual elites is absolutely warranted: ‘since intellectuals always go to extremes and reduce ideas ad absurdum, the prejudices of the common man may be more trustworthy’ (1981: 257).

Canovan and Arendt were also hostile to the loaded concepts of truth and science. Arendt prioritized opinion over truth and criticized the search for the latter as an ‘essentially coercive’ endeavour whose goal is ‘to silence opinion and impose uniformity’ (1974: 114). Canovan agreed that no one should put trust ‘in a providential progress towards truth’ (1978: 41) and emphasized the potentially destructive force of scientific innovation. Her preferred example of failed progressivist-scientific vanguardism was one of Chesterton’s major talking points: eugenics. For Canovan, the history of eugenics ‘indicates the dangers of a faith in “advanced”

ideas' (1981: 256). There is nothing surprising, she says, in the fact that advanced nations such as Germany, Britain and the United States supported this monstrosity, 'for eugenics was part of the striving for scientific control over man's environment and destiny that stemmed from the Enlightenment itself' (1981: 256). Canovan praised Chesterton's anti-eugenicist crusade as a defence 'of sanity, decency, and common sense' and urged us to realize the folly of 'the respectable intellectual orthodoxy of the time' (1977b: 258) that dared to deride him as a reactionary. Chesterton's ideas were controversial but he was only trying to remind the 'powerful elites of his time... of the humanity and dignity of the inferior beings they so often manipulated. Even if we cannot, upon consideration, endorse some of his views', Canovan concluded, 'we can certainly honour his chivalrous struggle' (1984b: 56).

One can further claim that Canovan's conservatism had a libertarian aura to it. For instance, while seeking to update Bentham's *Handbook of Political Fallacies*, she offered the Fallacy of Action: 'the constant cry whenever someone has a grievance, that "something must be done", and the strenuous efforts made by politicians (especially on television) to look as though they are doing something – or would be doing something if they were in office – even if they know that nothing effective can be done' (1984c: 12). In the same vein, she contributed the Fallacy of Rationalism:

that the discovery and publication of truth can never have harmful effects; that any institution that is worth having must be capable of being precisely defined and defended; that deliberate planning must be better than haphazard growth; that the cure for inefficient administration is 'rationalisation' on a larger scale; above all, the fallacy that there is no social 'problem' that cannot be 'solved' by investigation, education and government spending. (1984c: 12)

Early in her career, Canovan had quipped with her husband – an artisan by profession – that 'Paternalistic elitism is the occupational hazard of the reformer' (Canovan and Canovan 1979: 273). Unbridled welfare liberalism in desperate search for social amelioration frequently degenerates, she charged with Chesterton, into 'a desire to do good to the poor against their will' (1977a: 14).

Canovan remained steadfastly anti-progressive until the end of her career, but her populist temperament ultimately transcended her – admittedly heteroclitic – conservative leanings. This is why, as I suggested at the beginning, the conservative label does not do Canovan full justice. Her challenge against the liberal canon mostly derived from the English populist tradition rather than from the specifically conservative one. Canovan's ultimate peer-reviewed article explicitly sides with 'anti-vanguardist populism' as an appropriate egalitarian counterweight against elitist intrusions into the lives of the commoners: the 'vanguardist way of thinking is so familiar that we rarely notice it', she complains:

not only is it built into liberalism, socialism and feminism, it is present even in modern conservatism, as in the 'trickle-down' theory of economic growth. And yet belief in progress is very hard to reconcile with equal respect for all human beings. It has the inescapable effect of giving a privileged status to the advanced, thereby devaluing the opinions, beliefs and way of life of the mass of mankind. This is true even of the most egalitarian forms of liberalism and socialism; there is always a vanguard further up the escalator of progress, whereas most people are to be simply the recipients of liberation, education, welfare, Westernisation and so on. (2004: 246)

Having offered a laundry list of failed vanguardist projects that in various iterations include Soviet collectivization, eugenics, nuclear reactors, supersonic concordes and urban planning,

she counsels political theorists to consider ‘alternative ways of thinking, including a populist mind-set’ (2004: 246).

Still, we must emphasize again that Canovan’s recurring plea to respect popular customs and traditions did not amount to a belief in a romantic populist utopia. That would have rendered her yet another vanguardist. True, she would openly suggest that ‘populist traditions enshrine human values that other ideologies have tended to neglect – values that could profitably be brought to bear on the making of political decisions’ (1977a: 153), but at the same time she remained wary of ideological militants of any sort and her personal populist values were always tempered by an Oakeshottian concern for placing ‘limits on power and on ambition in the uses of power’ (1998: 240). Canovan invoked the *Narodniki* and their ‘excessive romanticizing of the *narod*’ (1981: 95) as a historical example to remind herself and to caution her audience that the ‘occupational hazard of intellectuals who do pay attention to populist ideas is that they are inclined to make fools of themselves idealising “the People”’ (2004: 247). Critical of Arendt’s unreserved admiration for grassroots, unpredictable political action by non-institutionalized actors, Canovan would quip that it is ‘not quite so obvious as [Arendt] seems to think that it would be better to have a country run by the sort of people who run voluntary organizations than by careerist politicians’ (1974: 124). Nevertheless, Canovan ultimately remained wedded to the utility of populist appeals:

Despite this danger, the nexus of populism with scepticism about progress and vanguardism may be worth thinking about. For one thing, it has affinities with the issues that arise in trying to spread liberal democracy to non-Western countries, especially those with deep-rooted popular religion, above all Islam. Perhaps we need to consider what it would actually mean to pay decent respect to the opinions of mankind. (2004: 247)

It is difficult to decipher whether Canovan’s idiosyncratic dissonance with liberalism was inspired by her conservative upbringing, her intellectual infatuation with the quirks of Arendtian and Chestertonian thought or with both. Canovan was no-one’s mere pupil, and as she liberated herself from intellectual orthodoxy she began to harbour an ideologically eclectic *forma mentis*. In any case, her challenge against conformity underwent a serious escalation in the early 1990s, when Canovan took it upon herself to excoriate liberal theorists for their hypocritical stance against nationalism and the nation-state. This requires separate examination.

IN DEFENCE OF NATIONHOOD

Apparently, what sparked off a new campaign in Canovan’s crusade against mainstream liberalism was the treatment Professor Roger Scruton received from his liberal peers at Oxford’s 1988 ‘Political Thought Conference’, when the conservative philosopher dared to defend a positive vision of nationalism. Canovan was present at the incident.⁶ It is worth reading her account at some length:

This paper caused quite a stir. There was a distinct sense of unease; a sense that unwritten rules had been broken, that the cat was loose among the pigeons or the bull in the china shop. To a certain extent this was a question of manners: there was, it was felt, a want of courtesy in defending ethnic loyalties before an audience that included a sprinkling of people who were, in these terms, outsiders. But the unease went deeper than that and seemed to stem from a half-articulate feeling that to speak publicly and seriously about such things as ethnic loyalty at all was a dangerous thing to do; dangerous because

it was too near the bone... To put the matter bluntly, the uneasy sense of being under threat that seemed to hang over the conference went with a feeling that views of the kind articulated by Scruton were dangerous because they might be true. Murmuring uneasily after the end of the session, the liberal-minded found themselves admitting that there was a great deal in what Scruton had said but feeling, with manifest discomfort, that precisely because these things might be true they would be better left unuttered, at least in public. (1990c: 7–8)

Inspired by the spectacle of liberals burying their heads in the sand when faced with reasonable communitarian arguments in favour of nationhood, Canovan published more than 15 works on this topic between 1990 and 2003, including her fifth monograph, *Nationhood and Political Theory*. Her trenchant criticism was pitched at two partly overlapping levels. In terms of political philosophy, she charged that liberals must give up their rationalist pretensions and concede that like every other Enlightenment ideology theirs also rests on a myth, the myth of natural rights. In terms of political practice, she urged cosmopolitan utopians to wake up to the fact that a robust national identity is a prerequisite for a durable liberal state.

Sarcasm came naturally to Canovan when taking on liberal totems.⁷ It is ‘strange that theorists of political myth who have had no difficulty in spotting the mythical element in Marxism’, she would charge, ‘should have so unanimously neglected the liberal myth of the state of nature’ (1990c: 10–11). What is so mythical about liberalism? That natural rights actually *do* exist: ‘The essence of the myth of liberalism is to assert human rights precisely because they are not built into the structure of the universe. The frightening truth concealed by the liberal myth is, therefore, that liberal principles go against the grain of human and social nature’ (1990c: 16). Echoing a similar point by Arendt, Canovan notes presciently that the American *Declaration of Independence* already gives it away itself by stating that ‘we hold these truths to be self-evident’. Why would we *hold* them to be self-evident if they had been put there by nature? Like every other grand political narrative, Canovan asserts, liberalism also requires the suspension of disbelief; it ‘never has been an account of the world but a project to be realized’ (1990c: 16).

Predictably, Canovan enlists Arendt to her cause. As a young refugee, Arendt had been taught to resist the assumption that men have natural rights. The possession of rights is a luxury of those who are citizens of a nation-state. Totalitarianism, that great monster, was made possible ‘by the destruction of the nation-state with its stable legal and territorial structure in favour of imperialist expansion’ (1974: 27). The state, Canovan insists in turn, is the ‘necessary condition of the kind of polity that can guarantee the supposedly “natural” or “human” rights of its members’ (1999c: 110). Besides, she inquires, if not from national solidarity, ‘Where is the state to draw its power from? What holds up the umbrella?’ (2000: 423). Instead of bashing the nation-state – and here Canovan breaks ranks with Arendt – liberals must acknowledge that there is no alternative to ‘the nation-state as a basis for political order and civilized politics’ (1996a: 12). Actually, she maintains, liberals are painfully aware of the internal contradiction of their argument. Their obliviousness is a pretension. ‘The current discourses of democracy, social justice and liberalism’, she says, ‘presuppose the existence not just of a state, but of a political community’ (1996a: 1–2) and the body politic is constituted – and liberals know it – as the nation. Nationhood is the indispensable collective identity that makes everything else possible, even for liberals.

One may be tempted to conclude that Canovan was anti-liberal, but she did not entertain a completely jaundiced view of liberalism and her humanitarian credentials are beyond dispute.⁸ Her thought is underpinned by a strongly secular and egalitarian ethos that pro-

foundly qualifies her idiosyncratic conservatism and opens a gulf with ‘the neoliberal worship of the free market that has been such a strident presence in conservative parties’ (1996b: 12). Canovan does not defend the nation-state from a primordialist perspective. While expressing sympathy for Smithian ethno-symbolism, she primarily sees nations as imagined communities but also accepts their real-world function of inspiring solidarity among an odd assortment of people: ‘what we have here is in a sense a religious phenomenon, a concern with eternal life’, Canovan claims; ‘eternal life achieved through participation in the life of a nation that transcends individual existence’ (1996c: 174). Canovan routinely offers her defence of the nation-state in the service of safeguarding human rights domestically and as a platform for international humanitarian intervention. Nation-states are for her the true and only rights-givers: ‘in so far as human rights are to be protected anywhere, it is nation-states (especially alliances of nation-states) that will make this possible – even though the guarded frontiers of nation-states continually violate the human rights of desperate refugees’ (1999c: 114). Nation-states, she reminds her cosmopolitan peers, ‘provide the indispensable launching pad for attempts to transcend nationalism’ (2001: 203).

All this said, Canovan was wary of the growing pressures of immigration on national identities. As a Eurosceptic, she believed the United Kingdom was being ‘dragged into the European Economic Community by her leaders’ (1977a: 149) and she remained pessimistic about the prospect of a common European identity. True to her anti-establishment colours to the end, she criticized European elites for attempting ‘to keep issues such as immigration off the political agenda, and to exclude politically incorrect views about outsiders from political discourse’ (2005: 64). Even though in June 2016, Canovan cast her vote against Brexit, her decision had no real trace of Europhilia. Rather, it rested on the conservative argument that exiting the European Union at that particular point in time was too risky for Britain and its people.

For Canovan, the issue of immigration came down to numbers and momentum: ‘*rapid* increases in ethnic and cultural plurality cannot avoid putting a strain on the mythical structure of kinship that supports national solidarity’ (1996c: 190, original italics). An anti-immigration stance therefore ‘may often be based on ignorance, racial prejudice and negative stereotypes’, but ‘from the point of view of democracy it cannot be regarded as entirely irrational’ (2005: 64). What exactly is this point of view? That democracies out there are a rare occurrence and that ‘the stretching of “us” to take in millions of unknown fellow-countrymen must be regarded as a considerable achievement’ (1996c: 184), which should not be jeopardized in the name of cosmopolitan utopianism. Democratic nation-states must be cherished and assisted in nurturing their collective ‘we’, they must be protected in order to continue to fulfill their role as rights-givers and welfare distributors. Hence, liberals and conservatives alike must remain vigilant about forces that threaten to erode the nation’s symbolic core: ‘Depending on their scale and nature, demographic changes could have politically disastrous effects’ (2005: 64) and whatever their moral misgivings, ‘theorists of politics need to pay more serious attention to patriotic sentiment’ (1996c: 178).

Canovan was conscious of her ultimate failure to offer a benign vision of nationhood that dispels the dangers of ethnic nationalism. Her practical, albeit disappointing, advice to her conservative and liberal peers was to let the sleeping dogs of nationalism lie, and to learn to muddle through as best as they can, deliberately fudging things up – ‘at a higher level, fudge *aufgehoben*’ (1996d: 81) – even if it means treating truth somewhat ‘economically’ (1990c: 5). ‘The most potent (and most misleading) myth of all’, she insisted, ‘is surely the belief that somewhere, behind the mundane surface of everyday politics, there must be some ultimate

source of authority that could save us from the responsibility of muddling through as best we can' (2005: 138).

In her parting academic shot, her chapter on 'The People' for the *Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*, Canovan still maintained that 'only the ties of nationhood are likely to generate a people with the kind of long-term political solidarity that is needed to sustain self-rule' (2006: 353–354). Again, her praise for the art of people-making has strongly populist, rather than ethnic, intonations. Political communities are based on a myth of a founding and redeeming people and 'the hidden truth of the myth is that ordinary individual people do have the potential (however rarely exercised) to mobilize for common action. On occasion, such grassroots mobilizations generate formidable power, bringing down a regime; more rarely, they sometimes manage to make a fresh start and to lay the foundations of a lasting political community' (2004: 251). When this happens, we are not dealing anymore with an 'imagined community' but with 'an occasional community of action – the rare appearance on the public stage of a large-scale movement in which individuals are consciously united as the people and act as a collective body' (2005: 121). Picking the theme up from where Arendt left it, Canovan (2002) offered the Eastern European Revolutions of 1989, particularly the Solidarity movement in early 1980s Poland, as genuinely Arendtian events. These 'occasional popular manifestations', Canovan maintained, 'have some kinship with the episodes of collective political action known as "social movements"' (2005: 135), and even if they usually prove short-lived, they leave a rich legacy behind them. Solidarity, she declares with obvious admiration, was the most authentic 'grass roots movement of the People' (2005: 136), that left behind it 'the memory – which rapidly crystallized into a myth – of the People in action, of the moment when the public arena... was briefly occupied by a collective yet plural People' (2002: 420).

CONCLUSION

Margaret Canovan was a brilliant scholar who detested established orthodoxy almost as much as the spotlight. Having punctured the misconceptions around her political worldview, my findings now invite a new reckoning with her work that cannot be broached in the short space of this chapter. Understandably, Canovan's numerous admirers may feel scandalized by her piquant commentary on the cosmopolitan code of conduct, by the way she charges against core tenets of the Enlightenment and by her vigorous defence of the nation-state. It would perhaps be more convenient to turn our gaze away in a self-numbing effort to retain an eviscerated image of Canovan's place among populism scholars. However, that would only serve to trivialize her ideas and make them fit snugly within our intimate ideological frameworks, which would be the worst kind of hubris toward Canovan's legacy. Instead, we should strive to understand this great woman on her own terms and to follow her lead in recognizing our own biases.

A novel appreciation of Canovan's work may even allow us to become more self-reflexive and to abandon once and for all the pretention that the study of populism can take place in an ideological vacuum. In Canovan's words, we must remain 'constantly aware of the relation between populism and its interpreters, and must look at the intellectual categories and the changes in the academic climate that have influenced estimates of "populism"' (1981: 12).

NOTES

1. The author wishes to thank Cherry Canovan, Rosemary O’Kane, John Horton, Garrath Williams and Scott Neil for accepting to be interviewed for this piece.
2. In the process of publishing her book, Canovan had written to Arendt in 1973, seeking guidance and expressing a willingness to discuss the manuscript in person. Arendt responded that ‘our prospects of meeting are not too bright. You have a child to take care of and I have old age that takes care of me’ (source: Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress). Arendt’s untimely death in 1975 came as a shock to Canovan, who forever regretted failing to meet her.
3. By the end of the 1950s Carter had become a leading radical activist and advocate of ‘people power’ and non-violent action in Britain. She died in August 2022. Carter and Canovan acknowledged each other’s help and inspiration in numerous publications.
4. Canovan was also involved in politics as a neighbourhood canvasser for the short-lived Social Democratic Party in 1981.
5. Her former peers invariably describe Canovan as a ‘small-c conservative’ and while she was not a partisan she did mostly vote Tory. When Margaret Thatcher won the Conservative leadership, Canovan initially entertained high hopes for the Iron Lady. However, she was disappointed when Thatcher proved to be too rigidly ideological once in power. Thatcher’s successor, John Major, on the other hand, became Canovan’s favourite politician due to his modest personality and his piece-meal approach to policymaking.
6. Canovan generally resented travelling to academic conferences and she chose not to attend any until her daughter reached the age of 14.
7. Canovan used to joke that her ‘biting one-liners’ are famous in academic circles.
8. Besides, most of her friends were liberals or much further to the left.

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12. Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and the discursive approach

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INTRODUCTION

Ernesto Laclau (1935–2014) and Chantal Mouffe (1943–) have developed a distinct approach to populism, which we can characterize as discursive, discourse-theoretical and post-Marxist, and which has developed into its own school usually referred to as the ‘Essex School’. They draw on the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) and on post-structuralist theory such as Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction and Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalysis. The theory is distinct as it takes populism as a discourse that constructs the people; moreover, the construction of a people is seen as central to politics more generally.

Laclau’s work was, from the very beginning, informed by the experience of Latin American populism, but it was only with the publication of his book *On Populist Reason* in 2005 that he developed a full-scale theory of populism (Laclau 2005a). This was the time of the Pink Tide of left populist governments in Latin America, and his work was both inspired by the Pink Tide and an inspiration for political movements at the time, including in his native Argentina. Mouffe draws on Laclau’s theory of populism to argue for populism as a strategy for the left, particularly in Europe where she has engaged with Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s *La France Insoumise* and with *Podemos* in Spain (Errejón and Mouffe 2016; Mouffe 2018).

Laclau and Mouffe base their approach to populism on their post-Marxist theory of hegemony and discourse, developed in critical conversation with the Marxist tradition. This is the topic of the first section of this chapter. I then lay out Laclau’s theory of populism as developed in *On Populist Reason*, focusing on the key concepts of that theory: antagonism, equivalence and the empty signifier. The following section examines Laclau’s and Mouffe’s arguments for left populism in Latin America and Europe, respectively. I end by considering three key issues from the critical literature on Laclau and Mouffe’s approach: the formalism and crypto-normativity of their definition of populism; the lack of an account of the relationship between populism and institutions; and the vertical and homogenizing structure of populism.

POPULISM AGAINST MARXISM

Laclau’s initial work on populism was an intervention into debates among Marxists (Laclau 1977: ch. 4), and his and Mouffe’s critiques of Slavoj Žižek can be read as a continuation of these debates (Laclau 2005a: 232–239; Mouffe 2005a: 33). Traditionally, Marxism has treated populism as a marginal phenomenon. Populism is seen as marginal vis-à-vis the centre of capitalism, and this marginality is understood geographically, historically and conceptually. Populism is identified as part of underdevelopment and as a contemporary oddity that capitalism will eventually brush aside. It is also seen as, at best, politically ambiguous. Marxists

have treated populism as ideology in the sense of distortion of reality and, hence, as irrational, a view shared by liberal approaches. The reality of capitalism is a system of exploitation of one class by another; the ideology of populism distorts this reality so that workers think of themselves as part of a people opposed to either an elite or, in the form of nationalist populism, to other peoples or minorities. Thus, populism diverts attention from the reality of capitalism, and it divides the working class in ways that are demobilizing (Mouzelis 1978; Žižek 2006).

Drawing on their theory of hegemony developed in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe (2001) challenge this view of populism. They treat populism as a discourse, which they define as a ‘structured totality resulting from [an] articulatory practice’ (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 105). Discourse may have linguistic elements, but it is material and may consist of institutions, structures, norms and so on (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 108). Discourse is constitutive, that is to say, it is not secondary or derivative of a more profound reality; it is not an epiphenomenon. Subjects – as individuals, as groups, a class, the people and so on – are constituted in discourse. Discourse is, therefore, performative: it does not simply reflect a reality, but is constitutive of reality. In the case of populist discourse, it constructs the object it claims to represent, namely the people. When a political movement acts and speaks in the name of the people, they performatively construct that people. It is precisely this aspect of populism that Marxists and liberals object to as a dangerous distortion: populists appeal to a people that can only be a fiction, and that diverts attention from the real subjects of history: classes (in the case of Marxism) and individuals (in the case of liberalism) (Mouzelis 1978; Müller 2017; Urbinati 2019; Žižek 2006).

For Laclau and Mouffe, this aspect of populism – that it constructs a collective subject, namely the people – is a general aspect of all politics. Whereas, for Marxists and liberals, populism can and should be distinguished from other forms of politics – including class struggle and democracy – for Laclau and Mouffe, ‘populism is the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such’ (Laclau 2005a: 67). This has opened Laclau to the critique that he conflates populism and politics, so that populism loses its specificity (Arditi 2010). To be clear, Laclau and Mouffe do identify a specificity to populism, as I will explain in the next section, but they also generalize an aspect of populism – namely, its performative character – to all forms of politics.

When Laclau talks about ‘populist reason’, he is not referring to a specific kind of reason (let alone irrationality), but to a general trait of all reason (Laclau 2005a). Here we should recall that the critique of populism is often cast in the name of reason and against populism as distortion and rhetoric – in short, as irrational. Affect plays a key role here for Laclau and Mouffe. Populism is often associated with affect, and Laclau and Mouffe embrace that in order to understand how, for instance, a populist discourse functions through the affective identification with a leader on the part of the people (Laclau 2005a: 110–120; Mouffe 2018: 72–78). But affect is, for Laclau and Mouffe, a general trait of all politics, and it is a matter, for them, of articulating affect in a radical democratic direction.

Here we see how Laclau and Mouffe identify what is usually seen as specific to populism as a general trait of all politics. This is a deconstructive move: they take what is identified by dominant discourses as marginal, reverse the marginality and hierarchy and generalize what used to be marginal. This is what they did with the concept of hegemony. In the dominant discourses within Marxism, hegemony was seen as a historically and conceptually marginal and secondary phenomenon. However, drawing on Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe show how hegemony is a general logic for understanding the constitution of society in all its aspects

(Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Taking hegemony as the performative articulation of identities, Laclau and Mouffe can treat both classes and the people as the result of hegemonic articulations. Classes do not have any ontological primacy, but neither does the people. The point is that *all* identities are the result of hegemonic articulations, and that those articulations are contingent, that is, there is nothing necessary to them. It is this general trait of politics that populism brings to light.

LACLAU'S THEORY OF POPULISM

Laclau's theory of populism is a formal theory. His definition of populism does not refer to any particular content of populist discourse, such as an agrarian basis or anti-immigration rhetoric. Instead, Laclau identifies certain discursive structures that define a discourse as populist. He also refers to those discursive structures as a logic that distinguishes populism: 'a particular logic of articulation of those contents – whatever those contents are' (Laclau 2005b: 33). Laclau writes: 'by populism I do not understand those referential contents but, rather, a way of constructing the political on the basis of interpellating the underdog to mobilize against the existing *status quo*' (in Howarth 2015: 266). The advantage of this approach is its travelability: his definition can capture a range of phenomena across different geographical, historical and political contexts.

In line with the performative approach to the construction of collective identities, Laclau does not start from the people, but asks *how* the people is constructed. That is, a populist discourse is not a discourse that represents – or misrepresents – the people and its interest, but a discourse that constructs a people. Laclau builds his theory from what he takes to be the most basic unit: *demands* (Laclau 2005a: ch. 4). A demand is made to the institutional order, for instance, a local authority or the state. At this point we are dealing with an institutional logic or a logic of difference, and the very fact that a demand is made to the institutions means that the institutional order is taken to be legitimate. If the demand is not met, and if other demands also go unfulfilled, those different demands may start developing links with each other and thus get articulated into a chain of equivalence. A demand about bus fares may be connected to demands about corruption and school funding. There is nothing necessary about the articulation of these different demands into a chain of equivalence; the demands do not reflect some underlying identity of, for instance, the people. Rather, the people is articulated – that is, constructed – through the articulation of the chain of equivalence. Note also that we start from demands that are different or, in Laclau's vocabulary, heterogenous; it is only their articulation that makes them the demands of the people. What is more, even while articulated as equivalent, the demands remain different and distinct. Thus, we should think of the chain of equivalence as combining difference and sameness – hence why we are dealing with equivalence and not identity.

The equivalence is represented positively by an empty signifier and negatively by an antagonistic frontier. The empty signifier might be a political leader (e.g. Perón), a slogan (e.g. the 99%) or simply 'the people'. The empty signifier is one of the demands of the chain of equivalence, which, because it is emptied of content, can stand in for – and represent – the chain as a whole (Laclau 1996: ch. 3; 2005a: ch. 4). Two caveats are necessary here. First, the empty signifier is only tendentially empty, and it retains some of its differences with other parts of the chain. Consider, for example, the way in which Perón could function as an empty signifier

representing a wide chain of different groups and demands as long as he was in exile; once back in Argentina, the differences between him and some of the groups aligned with Peronism became visible, and the chain fell apart (Laclau 2005a: 220–221). Second, note that Laclau's terminology shifts between demands and signifiers, but at this point we do not need to occupy ourselves with this.

The equivalence is also represented by the antagonism that all the parts of the chain share vis-à-vis a common enemy, for instance, a local authority. The demands all share this opposition, but recall that the differences between the demands do not disappear altogether. As a result, the antagonism – like the emptiness – is a tendential one.

Equivalence, empty signifier and antagonism are, thus, closely related, and we cannot have one without the others. Given that we are dealing with a formal definition of populism, each side of the antagonistic frontier can be occupied by any identity (e.g. 'the people' or 'the underdog' versus 'the elites' or 'the establishment'). What defines a discourse as populist is the degree of equivalence, emptiness and antagonism, and this definition covers populist discourses of very different ideological content, for instance, right- and left-wing populisms. The more equivalence, emptiness and antagonism, the more populist a discourse is, and populist is here opposed to institutional discourses where the logic of difference is predominant.

Populism is not, for Laclau, an ideology in the way that, for instance, socialism is, but a way of articulating different demands, which may themselves be ideological in the usual sense of the term. One of the examples that Mouffe uses is the contrast between the Le Pens' right-wing xenophobic and exclusionary populism and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's left-wing and inclusionary populism. Both discourses are articulated around 'the (French) people', but the Front National/National Rally articulates the people as the ethnic and racial nation, whereas the Front de Gauche/France Insoumise articulates the people as the underdog, including immigrant communities (Mouffe 2013: 121–123). One articulates the French people together with a mixture of neoliberal and protectionist economic policies; the other articulates the French people together with socialist economic policies. Some of the demands/signifiers may be the same in the two discourses, while others are different, but it is not the demands/signifiers 'themselves' that make the discourses populist. Both discourses are populist because of the way in which they articulate the demands/signifiers: they articulate a chain of equivalence, because their leaders play the role of empty signifiers and because they construct an antagonistic frontier that divides French society.

In conclusion, for Laclau and Mouffe, populism is a way of articulating a collective subject, which may or may not have the name of 'the people'. What distinguishes populism is the degree of equivalence, emptiness and antagonism, not some specific demands about immigrants, the regulation of prices and so on. While I have left out some details of the theory, it really is a simple and stringent theory that makes it possible to study the degree of populism of a wide range of phenomena (see García Agustín 2018; Marttila 2019; Panizza 2005).

LEFT-WING POPULISM IN LATIN AMERICA AND EUROPE TODAY

Laclau describes the debates on the left in his native Argentina in the 1950s and 1960s, when he was a political activist, as shaped by two major and partly overlapping questions: how to relate to the national-popular and how to relate to Peronism. The national-popular was artic-

ulated in opposition to imperialism, but also in opposition to a communist internationalism. Peronism shaped Argentinian politics from the late 1940s onwards in such a way that you were forced to identify not only with left or right, but also with or against Perón (Laclau 1977: 176–191; 2005a: 214–221).

Laclau's initial academic work on populism was written in the 1970s in the context of debates within Marxism about how to understand populism, nationalism and fascism (Laclau 1977). Already then, Laclau held the view that these phenomena could not simply be seen as aberrations from the natural course of history and should not be relegated to a position of marginality. That view in turn implied that traditional Marxist concepts had to be revised, for instance, the role of the working class and the peasants, the stages of development and so on. At the time, Laclau argued that the struggle for socialism had to be articulated as a 'popular' struggle of the people against the power bloc, that is, in a way that moves beyond the class interests of the working class and beyond the merely economic.

Laclau's main work on populism, *On Populist Reason*, was published in 2005, at a time when the left populist Pink Tide swept across Latin America. Even before the publication of that book, his work was well known among political activists across the continent, and in interviews at the time he made repeated references to the political movements of the Pink Tide (e.g. Laclau 2011).

Although we refer to these movements under the umbrella term of the Pink Tide, there were big differences between them. Consider, for instance, the differences between Venezuela and Argentina. The Venezuela of Hugo Chávez and Nicolas Maduro was, and is, much more populist in Laclau's terms: a strong focus on the leader acting as an empty signifier, and a sharp, and repeatedly asserted, antagonistic frontier dividing the people from the oligarchic classes and imperialist forces. The Argentina of the successive governments of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner was a more ambiguous mixture of populism and institutionalism, and Laclau was usually very supportive of the Kirchner governments.

Their differences apart, in Laclau's view, Latin American populism has had the positive effect of democratizing these societies. While the political systems may at times have been characterized by liberal institutions, they have also been oligarchic. Populism has democratizing effects by bringing otherwise excluded sectors into the representative system. While any populist movement will, at least to some extent, be hierarchical – through the relationship between the leader, the movement and the masses – it nonetheless provides the masses with a voice that is not otherwise available in an oligarchic system. This view of populism as the facilitator of the popular sovereignty of the people – a view that Laclau shares with Mouffe – is also what others have criticized Laclau and Mouffe for: insofar as populism pits the will of the people *against* liberal institutions, populism is seen as a threat to liberal democracy (Mouzelis 1978; Müller 2017; Urbinati 2019: ch. 3; Žižek 2006). However, while Laclau and Mouffe acknowledge the tensions between popular sovereignty and liberal institutions, their argument for left populism is for a kind of populism that combines popular sovereignty and pluralism – in Laclau's terms, a populism that combines equivalence and difference (in Howarth 2015: 266–267). Laclau finds that in the Kirchner governments in Argentina; Mouffe finds it in left populist movements in Europe.

Mouffe first engaged with populism in the context of the rise to prominence of right-wing populists such as Jörg Haider in Austria and the Le Pens in France in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Mouffe 2005b; 2018: ch. 1). Her analysis of right-wing populism is revealing of her approach to populism in general. She interprets the emergence of right-wing populism in the

European context as a response to post-democracy, by which she means that liberal democracy has been reduced to one of its two components, namely liberalism. The result is that the constitutive tension between liberalism and democracy – or individual liberty rights and popular sovereignty – is suppressed. At the same time, since the 1990s, Western politics has been characterized by a consensus around the neoliberal economic model: ‘The current centre-left politics has accepted the terrain established by decades of neo-liberal hegemony’ (in Martin 2013: 232). As a result, the frontier between left and right has disappeared.

With the dislocation of the 2007–2008 financial crisis, a ‘populist moment’ emerged where the only alternative to the consensus of the centre came, first, from right-wing populism and, later, from left-wing populists. Like Laclau, Mouffe distinguishes between the ideological content and the populist articulation of demands. As such, she can distinguish between right-wing and left-wing populisms, and argue that the left should pursue a populist strategy. Right-wing populists often combine national chauvinism with support for neoliberal policies; a left populism must be articulated around democracy, equality and social justice (Mouffe 2018: 23–24, 82–85). ‘What we urgently need today’, Mouffe writes, ‘is the development of left-wing populist parties able to give an institutional expression to the democratic demands of the numerous groups aspiring to an alternative to the current hegemony of neo-liberalism’ (Martin 2013: 236).

For Mouffe, like Laclau, populism is a way to achieve more democracy. It is so because populism is associated with the popular sovereignty of the people and, hence, democracy. Left populism is a way to radicalize democracy, to use Mouffe’s term (Mouffe 2018: ch. 3). Mouffe combines the argument for (left) populism with her argument for agonistic democracy, and Laclau also places his call for left populism within Mouffe’s agonistic democracy (Laclau 2005a: 166–170; Mouffe 2005a). Like her argument for left populism, Mouffe’s agonistic democracy is a response to the post-democratic state of our societies: the absence of substantial political conflict and the consensus of the centre around neoliberal economic policy. Agonistic democracy is also an alternative to liberal and deliberative democratic models of democracy because, in Mouffe’s view, these models do not allow for sufficient amounts of conflict between different hegemonic projects and do not allow for the central role of passions in politics (Mouffe 2000; 2013). Mouffe believes that (left) populism can provide more agonism and passion, and so populism may be positive for democracy. While agonistic democracy implies more conflict, this conflict should be one between adversaries who respect one another’s right to exist. In an agonistic democracy there is, thus, no room for antagonistic enemies who seek to extinguish one another. This means that, for Mouffe, an agonistic populism must transform the antagonistic enemy into an agonistic adversary (Mouffe 2018).

It should be clear that, for Laclau and Mouffe, populism is not unequivocally positive; not all forms of populism are democratic. This is most clear in Mouffe when she argues for the articulation of a left populist strategy to counter the rise of right-wing populism, and when she argues for an agonistic populism rather than an antagonistic populism (Mouffe 2018). It is also the case when Laclau discusses different historical and contemporary forms of populism (Laclau 2005a: part III). Indeed, drawing on Mouffe’s theory of agonistic democracy, Laclau argues that populisms can be found on a spectrum from democratic to totalitarian (Laclau 2005a: 166).

Mouffe has been involved with some of the contemporary left populist movements in Europe, and a brief look at two of these can clarify further her approach to left populism. The founders of the Spanish party Podemos were influenced by Laclau’s and Mouffe’s theories of

hegemony and populism, and Mouffe has worked with them at different points (e.g. Errejón and Mouffe 2016; Mouffe 2018). While it never referred to itself as populist, Podemos' discourse was clearly populist when it emerged in 2014. It identified a crisis of the political, juridical and economic institutions in Spain; drawing on the discourse of the 2011 *indignados* movement, it articulated a chain of equivalence among a range of different demands against the institutions; used its leader, Pablo Iglesias, and other key signifiers as empty signifiers; and articulated an antagonistic frontier vis-à-vis the establishment (*la casta*). Later, and in particular as it entered government, its discourse became more agonistic, especially vis-à-vis its government partners and the Spanish Constitution (García Agustín 2018; Kioupkiolis 2019).

Another example is Jean-Luc Mélenchon. In 2012, he ran as a candidate for the Left Front (*Front de Gauche*) in the French presidential election. Since then, he has articulated his political project in more populist, and less 'leftist', terms. In 2017 and 2022, he ran as a candidate for a new party, La France Insoumise, articulating a progressive notion of the French people as an alternative to both the right-wing French nation of Marine Le Pen and others and as an alternative to centrist political parties. According to Mouffe, this is also an attempt to articulate the indignation of Le Pen voters in a left direction, directing their anger not towards immigrants but towards neoliberalism (Mouffe 2018: 21–24).

The movements of Podemos and Mélenchon are both very leader-centric and rely on top-down organization (Kioupkiolis 2019; Marlière 2019). The leader-centric structure of these movements is analogous to the centrality of the empty signifier in Laclau's theory of populism where the empty signifier represents the chain of equivalence as a whole. The top-down organization is analogous to the relationship between the empty signifier and the chain of equivalence. It is no surprise that those who have argued for more horizontalist modes of politics have been critical of populist movements and of Laclau and Mouffe's approach (Hardt and Negri 2009; 2017; Kioupkiolis and Katsambekis 2014). From their critics' perspective, populists and Laclau and Mouffe try to construct the people from the top down. From Laclau's and Mouffe's perspectives, this cannot be altogether avoided, because populism is a discourse that constructs a people rather than reflecting an already constituted people (Errejón and Mouffe 2016: 48–51; Mouffe 2018: 53–55, 70).

CRITICAL ISSUES I: FORMALISM AND CRYPTO-NORMATIVITY

In the following, I examine three critical issues surrounding Laclau and Mouffe's discourse-theoretical approach. Doing so will help us get a better understanding of their approach as well as its possible limitations.

As noted above, Laclau's theory of populism is a formal one. It does not define populism by its contents but instead identifies populism as a way of articulating demands. For Laclau, this is a strength of the theory; for others, it is a weakness. There are at least two reasons why one might view it as a weakness.

The first is to note that Laclau's formalism leads him to conflate populism, hegemony and politics (Arditi 2010; Müller 2017; Stavrakakis 2004). There is certainly evidence for this interpretation in Laclau's own text. For instance, he writes that 'the trademark of populism would be just the special emphasis on a political logic which, as such, is a necessary ingredient of politics *tout court*' (Laclau 2005a: 18; Mouffe 2018: 11). It may be that one can find the

root of this conflation of populism, hegemony and politics in Laclau's biography: he came to theorize politics through his experiences with populism in Argentina.

The second reason for viewing formalism as a weakness is that populism becomes a matter of degree and, so, Laclau's definition of populism cannot do the work we usually ask of concepts, namely to distinguish populist from non-populist phenomena. As Yannis Stavrakakis has argued, this degreeism leads to conceptual overstretching to the extent that every political phenomenon has something populist about it (Stavrakakis 2019: 196). This critique is, thus, connected to the critique that Laclau conflates populism and politics.

Stavrakakis and others have tried to address this by suggesting that populism must involve the articulation of a people, which helps us distinguish populism from, for instance, nationalism (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). Specifying a content to populism in this way takes away from the formalism of Laclau's theory. However, one may ask if a strict distinction between form and content was ever tenable in any case; and it is worth noting that, whenever Laclau exemplifies his theoretical categories, he has in mind certain contents, for instance a people in the sense of plebs or underdog.

It is important to add that the formal and abstract character of Laclau's theory of populism does not preclude its use for empirical studies. Laclau himself provides extended empirical analyses of historical and contemporary populist movements (Laclau 1977: ch. 4; 2005a: part III), as does Mouffe (Mouffe 2005b). There is now a wealth of empirical studies that have used Laclau and Mouffe's discourse-theoretical approach to populism (e.g. García Agustín 2018; Kioupkiolis 2019; Kioupkiolis and Katsambekis 2014; Marttila 2019; Ostiguy et al. 2021; Panizza 2005; Stavrakakis 2004). Such empirical studies are made possible by the formalism of the discourse-theoretical approach.

A related critique is that Laclau's theory of populism does not allow us to distinguish between left and right populism. Others have suggested distinguishing between left- and right-wing populism by associating left-wing populism with the articulation of a people and a spatial antagonism between 'down' (the people) and 'up' (the elites). In contrast, right-wing populism is associated with the articulation of a substantial identity such as the nation and a spatial antagonism between 'in' (the national we) and 'out' (immigrants, etc.). In this way, left- and right-wing populisms can be distinguished as inclusionary and exclusionary, respectively (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013; Stavrakakis 2019: 202–203). Mouffe makes a similar argument when she distinguishes left populism from right populism and from populism more generally; this is, for instance, how she distinguishes the left populism of Mélenchon from the right populism of the *Le Pens* (Mouffe 2018: 6, 23–24, 82–85).

A related issue with Laclau's approach is an alleged crypto-normativity (Kim 2022). Laclau and Mouffe and others working with the discourse-theoretical approach are often critical of other approaches – especially Cas Mudde's ideational approach (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013; 2017; Katsambekis 2022; Kim 2022) – for their dismissal of populism as a moralistic defence of the homogeneity of the will of the people, which they see as antithetical to pluralism. Laclau seeks to avoid this by treating populism as a formal logic. Yet, it is also clear that Laclau sees populism as a way to democratize society through the inclusion of hitherto unrepresented demands and constituencies. This is the legacy of Latin American populism, but it is also part of European and North American populism, both left and right. The problem here is that Laclau insists on the formal character of populism while simultaneously – but often only implicitly – associating populism normatively with democratization. In the case

of Mouffe, this appears to be less of a problem because she is explicit that she uses Laclau's theory of populism as a starting point to argue for populism as a strategy in the contemporary 'populist moment' (Mouffe 2018).

CRITICAL ISSUES II: POPULISM AND INSTITUTIONS

Laclau and, to a lesser degree, Mouffe distinguish populism from institutionalism. Populism is associated with politics and rupture, and institutionalism is associated with administration and sedimentation. This distinction can be traced back to the distinction they made in their theory of hegemony between equivalence and difference. Populism involves the articulation of chains of equivalence among demands that cannot be met by an administrative system that would co-opt differential demands in an incrementalist fashion.

Laclau has little to say about institutions or about populists in government in his theory of populism, however. As the quintessential form of politics, he understands populism as an anti-system challenge and, thus, as a rupture with existing institutions. The relative silence on populism in government or in any other institutional position is ironic given Laclau's frequent use of Perón and Kirchner as examples of populism (Laclau 1977; 2005a). However, while Laclau's theory of populism may be relatively silent about the relationship between populism and institutionalism, and about the populists in power, this is not so in his political interventions in interviews, short newspaper articles and so forth. In those places, he insists on the mutual articulation of populism and institutionalism, and that this is something positive. So much so that he claimed that Kirchnerism was 'the real left' because it managed to combine populism and institutionalism, and to combine mobilization of the masses with government (e.g. Laclau 2011). The relationship between populism and institutionalism is all the more interesting in the context of the historical opposition in Latin American politics between presidentialism and parliamentarism. Like others, Laclau connects presidentialism to the more or less direct mobilization of the masses against an oligarchic liberalism whose power is represented in parliaments. To inquire about the relationship between populism and institutionalism is also to inquire about the ways in which the people may be represented, and whether populism necessarily implies certain institutional forms such as a presidential system.

Mouffe offers her own take on this with her theory of agonistic democracy, which should be understood as an institutional space defined by the values of equality and liberty for all, and within which populists may articulate political frontiers (Mouffe 2018; Laclau refers to Mouffe's theory of agonistic democracy in Laclau 2005a: 166–170). Although short on concrete institutional proposals, at least her theory of agonistic democracy considers institutions as central to politics, including when we are dealing with populist politics.

CRITICAL ISSUES III: VERTICALITY AND HOMOGENEITY

Recall that, for Laclau, a populist discourse articulates a chain of equivalence between different demands, or identities, so that those demands share something, which is represented by the empty signifier. The resultant people shares some identity, that is, some homogeneity. Moreover, the relation between the chain of equivalence (the people) and the empty signifier

(e.g. the leader) is a relatively vertical one, a verticality that may be reflected in the hierarchical organization of the populist movement.

Together, these aspects of Laclau's theory of populism gives rise to two related criticisms: that it homogenizes the people, and that it implies a hierarchical form of politics. According to these criticisms, Laclau's and Mouffe's populism involves the imposition of a homogeneous identity onto the heterogeneity of society from above. The critique is not that Laclau and Mouffe are wrong about populism, but that they are wrong to defend populism as a strategy for the left.

The liberal-democratic version of this critique is that populism involves the articulation of a homogeneous people, and that this is a threat to the pluralism of liberal democracy. The identity of the people is an ideological screen for particular interests dressed up as the general will of the people – a general will that does not exist in modern, pluralist societies (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2017; Urbinati 2019).

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri put forward another version of this critique from an autonomist post-Marxist perspective. In their view, 'Laclau maintains that a transcendent motor, a hegemonic force, is necessary to organize from above the plural social subjectivities into "the people"', which is, thus, 'organized as a united subject from above'. Their conclusion is that Laclau is stuck in 'the categories of modern politics and modern sovereignty' (Hardt and Negri 2017: 328). They oppose the multitude as an alternative to the people. Unlike the people, the multitude is not organized but self-organizing; unlike the people, the multitude is not homogeneous but heterogeneous (Hardt and Negri 2009: 165–178). Richard Day has put forward a similar critique, this time from a post-anarchist perspective. His critique is a general critique of hegemony, of which populism would be a particularly clear example, and he shares with Hardt and Negri the view that Laclau is stuck in a modern conception of politics that is not particularly useful for the left today (Day 2005: chs 2–3).

Laclau's and Mouffe's responses to these criticisms have been three-fold (Laclau 2005a; Mouffe 2018). First, they argue, equivalence is not identity; equivalence is always articulated together with difference, so no collective subject is ever completely homogeneous. Second, the criticisms ignore that verticality – and, more generally, power – is an inherent aspect of all politics. In Laclau's terms, politics consists of articulating particular interests as general interests; this is what hegemony is about, and populism is a particularly clear example of this. In Laclau's and Mouffe's terms, their critics ignore 'the political': the fact that there is no politics without antagonism, exclusion and power. Third, while there is necessarily some element of verticality between the people and the leader, the latter must be recognized by the former. That is, the populist leader articulates an image of the people and of him/herself as the representative of the people, but the articulation is only successful insofar as individuals and groups within society identify with the articulation. The relationship between leader and people is not a one-way relationship where an identity is imposed from above.

CONCLUSION

Laclau and Mouffe's discourse-theoretical approach to populism draws on Gramsci and post-structuralist theory. The three key concepts of the theory are antagonism, equivalence and the empty signifier. It is a formal theory of populism that does not associate populism with any particular content. That is a strength – because it can be applied to a number of different

phenomena – but also a potential weakness – because it can lead to conceptual stretching. It is also a performative theory of populism: it treats populism as a discourse that constructs the people. We can therefore not take the identity of the people as a given or as a starting point, but critics have also noted that this may lead to an overemphasis on the top-down construction of the identity of the people by political leaders.

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13. Populism as a political strategy

Kurt Weyland

INTRODUCTION

Soon after liberal democracy had in the late twentieth century vanquished its remaining ideological rival, communism, a new challenge emerged, surprisingly from the inside, namely populism. Charismatic leaders appealed to supposedly neglected, ‘excluded’ sectors of the citizenry by attacking entrenched political elites and established parties as selfish and corrupt and by promising to empower ‘the people’. Fuelled by a groundswell of popular disaffection, populism turned into a global wave, which achieved its most stunning success in 2016 with the United Kingdom’s Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump in the United States. Consequently, longstanding democracies suddenly looked precarious. This shock makes it crucial to develop a better understanding of populism and an accurate assessment of the threat that these charismatic leaders pose to democracy.

This urgent task is difficult, however, because populism has long been a notoriously contested concept with unclear implications for politics and democracy: some scholars depict populism as a force for the renewal of democracy, whereas others see it as a profound threat (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 80–86). As definitions and approaches have proliferated, scholarly consensus has proven elusive. How to find a way out of this confusion?

This chapter argues that a political-strategic approach, which focuses on the political core of populism as a strategy for winning and exercising power, constitutes the best option.¹ It examines first and foremost what populists do, their real political actions and the resulting consequences for politics and institutional life. Specifically, the political-strategic approach conceives of populism as revolving around personalistic plebiscitarian leadership (Weyland 2001, 2017): headstrong, dominant politicians constantly try to win power and augment their clout; and they do so by drawing on direct, uninstitutionalized support from a broad, heterogeneous, largely unorganized mass of followers (see also Carrión 2022: 9–14; Kenny 2020, forthcoming; Roberts 2006).

This chapter first traces the theoretical origins of the political-strategic approach, which has its main roots in Weber’s (1976: 140–148, 654–683) seminal theory of charisma. Then I explain the principal features of this conceptualization and situate populism by contrast to other types of political strategy. A comparison with alternative definitions, especially ideational approaches – broadly conceived – completes the chapter’s first half.

Thereafter I highlight that the political-strategic approach has become even more important and useful in the current era, when more and more populist leaders have won chief executive office across the world. Given this takeover of government power, populists’ strategic political actions and their institutional repercussions for democracy assume crucial relevance. Because the political-strategic approach concentrates precisely on these aspects, it is supremely well positioned to elucidate the main challenge currently facing liberal pluralism.

Interestingly, while the political-strategic approach emphasizes that populism poses serious risks to democracy, its focus on strategic political action and its preconditions also puts these

risks in perspective. Populist chief executives certainly *seek* complete political predominance, which would skew competitiveness and thus pave the way toward authoritarianism. But they normally face obstacles to their power hunger and therefore can achieve their autocratic goals only under specific circumstances, which makes their hegemony – and the corresponding suffocation of democracy – unlikely. Specifically, populist leaders can impose their supremacy only where institutional weakness makes democracy vulnerable to dismantling; and where unusual conjunctural opportunities enable populist chief executives to gain overwhelming support, which allows them to push aside remaining political and institutional constraints. As comprehensive investigations show, these two types of necessary preconditions for the asphyxiation of liberal pluralism coincide only in a minority of cases (Weyland 2020; see also Kyle and Mounk 2018).

Thus, the political-strategic approach explains why populism is a danger for democracy – but also why this danger is less serious and devastating than many scholars fear (e.g. Kaufman and Haggard 2019; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). By offering a realistic assessment of democracy's contemporary predicament, the political-strategic approach proves its important scholarly contributions and its practical relevance.

THEORETICAL ORIGINS

The political-strategic approach finds its fundamental theoretical inspiration in Weber's brilliant examination of charismatic authority. Ranging across world history, the famous sociologist conceived of charisma as one of three ideal-typical bases of legitimate authority, besides tradition and rational legality (Weber 1976: 140–148, 654–668). Whereas the two other types are based on rules that empower yet also bind leaders, charisma rests on personal supremacy that goes beyond and overcomes established rules. A leader seen as commanding extraordinary, supernatural abilities and capacities, gifted by divine providence, appeals to and finds devotion from a wide range of followers who emerge from traditional bonds or leave behind formal organizational commitments and fervently dedicate themselves to advancing and living for the monumental, transformative cause proclaimed by the leader. With the force of personality and the claim to pursue a redemptive mission, the leader seeks to instil unconditional faith in his supporters and groom a select circle of totally committed disciples, who obediently execute all the leader's wishes and whims (see Andrews-Lee 2021).

Thus, charismatic authority embodies unbounded agency that seeks unconstrained latitude and supreme power and that therefore rejects rules and institutions, ranging from time-honoured customs to formal constitutional provisions, as illegitimate fetters on the leader's will and transformational capacity. Consequently, charisma is not only anti-traditional and anti-rational, but also anti-institutional. Trusting in the leader's supreme grasp of the followers' destiny and of the path toward salvation, charismatic authority lets the leader govern as he or she sees fit, unencumbered by customary or institutional constraints and uncontested by oppositional forces, which are denounced as selfishly hindering the promised salvation and betraying the country's historical mission.

While charismatic authority has played a crucial role throughout global history, ranging from Jesus Christ to Mao Zedong, it assumes the form of populism in the modern era of popular sovereignty, when support from a majority of citizens, especially in elections, is crucial for the quest for and exercise of political power. Under democracy, charisma therefore

operates primarily as personalistic plebiscitarian leadership, the central features highlighted by the political-strategic approach. Accordingly, populism rests on the leader's force of personality, which tries to strip away the constraints of customs, rules and organizations. To justify this supremacy, personalistic leaders claim to embody 'the will of the people' and, literally, to incarnate their followers. Crystallizing populists' basic claim of legitimacy (see Urbinati 2019), Bolivian ex-president Morales announces in his Twitter handle: 'Evo is the people'. And because *vox populi* is *vox Dei*, leaders must intransigently pursue their interpretation of the popular will, regardless of formal rules and institutional principles; and they must vanquish any resistance that seeks to block their advance – and that, 'logically', can emanate only from the enemies of the people.

The predominance of personalistic leadership thus rests on a plebiscitarian foundation, especially the devotion of masses of followers, who firmly support the leader as their innate spokesperson and heroic advocate and protagonist. Aware of their incapacity successfully to advance their own causes and satisfy their needs, a vast cross-section of citizens delegate this arduous task to their extraordinary leader whose quasi-divine gifts enable the leader to fight on behalf of the people. Because the leader can finally do what the followers had long proven unable to accomplish, they go to great lengths to support the leader's epic struggle. Therefore, personalistic leadership and its plebiscitarian base, the two core features of populism in the political-strategic approach, sustain and condition each other.

Personalistic plebiscitarian leadership flourishes where political agency has great latitude – that is, conversely, where traditional bonds and organizational structures do not hold sway. Historically speaking, populism therefore tends to emerge where traditional clientelism has lost its firm command over people, as Nicos Mouzelis (1985) highlighted. And in more developed settings, it arises where party institutionalization (Mainwaring 2018) is low, especially where established political organizations crumble and collapse, making citizens available for personalistic appeals (Roberts 2014). Thus, there is a negative correlation between the strength of informal bonds and formal institutions, on the one hand, and personalistic plebiscitarian leadership, on the other. Indirectly, therefore, the vast range of institutionalist scholarship in contemporary political science, especially on political parties, the crucial intermediary organizations in representative democracy, helps elucidate the prevalence of populism.

CONCEPTUALIZATION

By defining populism via personalistic plebiscitarian leadership, the political-strategic approach highlights the quest for unbounded agency and its sustenance in quasi-direct, unmediated and uninstitutionalized mass support. Populism revolves around supremely powerful personalities who claim to incarnate 'the people'; and as authentic embodiments of popular sovereignty, they have every right – indeed, an uncontested duty – to act in whatever way they intuit the will of the people.

Conversely, their followers are convinced that establishment politicians have fundamentally failed to represent their needs and interests faithfully. But these followers also know that they, 'the little people', lack the capacity to advance those needs and interests on their own, through successful bottom-up initiatives. After all, the tremendous heterogeneity of 'the people' and the crippling collective-action problems that this vast agglomeration faces prevent its self-empowerment.

Therefore, the followers vest this interest representation in the charismatic leader whom they see as incarnating the will of the people. As the leader automatically and organically speaks on behalf of the people, representation thus turns into identification: the followers see themselves embodied in the leader (Urbinati 2019). As Venezuela's Bolivarian populist proclaimed, 'Chávez is the people, and the people is Chávez'.

Based on this notion of representation as incarnation and identity, populism does not build strong organizations with intermediary cadres. Instead, what is decisive is the direct connection between the leader and the followers, forged via charismatic appeals from the top down and via intense, fervent devotion and 'undying' commitment from the bottom up. Resting on these deeply personalistic bonds, populist linkages deliberately bypass intermediaries and the construction of rule-bound, bureaucratic organizations, which would hinder and hollow out the intense personal connection between leader and followers. Charisma thus resists routinization (see Andrews-Lee 2021). Instead, the leader is in constant campaign mode, to keep the followers mobilized, excited and fervently committed. In particular, the leader actively looks for dangerous enemies to keep the followers in a state of emotional agitation; nothing better than a presumed threat to induce 'the people' to rally around their leader and offer all-out support to this self-proclaimed saviour of the people.

Because the followers see themselves incarnated in the leader (Urbinati 2019), they are eternally grateful that the leader finally speaks as their authentic voice and expresses and pursues needs and interests, including concerns and resentments, that they themselves could not and did not dare to advance on their own. For that reason, the followers support the leader through thick and thin, in good times and in bad. Consequently, they do not apply stringent performance standards to hold the leader accountable, as liberal-democratic notions of representation would counsel. Instead, they give the leader ample latitude because he or she spearheads a heroic struggle for redemption and confronts supposedly nefarious, dangerous enemies. Because setbacks are to be expected along this rocky road, what is decisive is the leader's monumental effort genuinely to promote the long-neglected will of the people.

Consequently, the followers do not pester the leader with critical scrutiny and sceptical evaluation, but extend a credit of trust and offer their backing in profusions of plebiscitarian acclamation, in frequent rituals of voting, in mass rallies and in eager social media following. The very nature of populist identification thus guarantees the leader a firmly, almost unconditionally committed core of followers who are unconcerned about performance indicators, as the immutable approval ratings of left-wing and right-wing populists, such as Mexico's López Obrador and the United States' Donald Trump, despite their deficient and very costly mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrate.

Even in highly polarized settings, however, where populist leaders also face considerable rejection and revulsion, there tends to be an uncommitted segment of swing voters as well, whose backing does depend on performance criteria. Accordingly, even in fiercely divided Venezuela, Chávez's presidential popularity and electoral support fluctuated, depending for instance on economic conjunctures. Moreover, as Weber (1976: 140–141, 655–656) already emphasized, even core followers defect if a leader utterly fails to cope with urgent, severe problems; charisma fades and eventually evaporates if divine providence seems to have abandoned the leader. Accordingly, populist presidents who could not get pressing economic crises such as hyperinflation under control ended up deflated and became vulnerable to the political establishment's counterattacks, as the 1992 impeachment of Brazilian president Collor de Mello on corruption charges shows.

Because it revolves around personalistic plebiscitarian leadership, populism differs from political strategies that have an institution as central axis and/or a firmer, more reliable base of support, such as party government and military rule, or relational clientelism, patrimonialism and corporatism (Weyland 2001: 12–14). Their feeble, potentially precarious foundation in turn induces populist leaders to supercharge their connections to followers with special intensity; instead of offering pragmatic interest representation, they seek deep emotional commitment and symbolic devotion. For this purpose, they deliberately turn politics from rule-bound competition with a legitimate democratic opposition into an all-out struggle against dangerous adversaries whom they denounce as nefarious traitors of the people.

Consequently, populism centres on raw, unvarnished politics in line with Carl Schmitt's (2009 [1932]) famous notion of an all-out struggle of friend versus enemy. Whereas other types of political strategy rest on scaffoldings of informal norms or formal rules, populism embodies politics pure: the energetic quest for and resolute exercise of political power, with as little regard and respect for established rules as possible.

By depicting populist leaders as opportunistic politicians who use direct appeals to their followers' needs and interests, emotions and resentments, in order to boost their own clout, the political-strategic approach embodies a basic assumption underlying rationalist theories, such as Anthony Downs' (1957) theory of democratic voting and William Riker's (1986) art of heresthetics: politicians pursue instrumental goals of augmenting their own power and latitude, whereas common citizens are motivated largely by genuine substantive preferences. Certainly, populist leaders also have ideological predilections and substantive interests, and they may genuinely seek to improve the wellbeing of 'the people'. But in their perceived struggle against pernicious enemies, they are always prepared to act with flexibility, freely modify and even abandon their prior stances, and deviate from any ideological or programmatic commitment for the sake of their grand cause. Accordingly, observers commonly highlight the utter pragmatism, if not opportunism, of populist leaders and emphasize their chameleonic character (Taggart 2000: 1–5, 94–98).

COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGES

With its concentration on how populist leaders and followers make decisions and act in politics, and what political and institutional repercussions their behaviour has, the political-strategic approach is particularly important and useful for academic analysis, and yields crucial practical insights for populists' liberal-democratic opponents. By contrast, the broad, heterogeneous set of ideological, discursive and ideational approaches miss the political core of populism by focusing primarily on what populists say, rather than on what they actually do (Hawkins et al. 2019; Katsambekis 2022; Mudde 2017).² Populist rhetoric, however, is famous for being unreliable, manipulative and irresponsible. Worse than average politicians, populist leaders commonly seek to win and captivate followers by making excessive, unrealistic promises and by spreading misinformation; and they unpredictably deviate from earlier pledges whenever they see fit. Why base the conceptualization of populism on such quicksand?

The political-strategic approach stands on much firmer ground by focusing instead on how populists really act in high-stakes politics. Whereas politicians can say all kinds of things, and whereas they often say disparate and even contradictory things to different audiences, action requires a more definite choice between options; thus, political action facilitates analytical

transparency by revealing effective preferences. Given the importance and repercussions of actual political decisions, the challenges and conflicts that populist initiatives often elicit force further clarification: Will a leader actually follow up on a trial balloon? Was a threatening move only a bluff or truly the first step toward aggression? Thus, political actions, and the corresponding reactions and subsequent responses, reveal where charismatic leaders and their movements really stand. For these reasons, a focus on populists' political behaviour provides a much clearer picture and more useful approach than a concentration on ideology, discourse and other ideational aspects.

By focusing primarily on what populists say, ideational approaches also risk implicitly painting a misleading picture. Depicting populism as the struggle of the pure, virtuous people against selfish, corrupt elites, populist discourse commonly promises to empower the common citizenry. And because ideational definitions do not highlight the decisive role of populist leadership, they do not correct the resulting impression that populism may promote authentic bottom-up participation. Indeed, advocates of ideational approaches argue that populism can have positive, not only negative consequences for democracy. While they agree with liberal critics that populism's anti-pluralist tendencies and its penchant for polarization pose significant threats, they also claim that populists' mobilization of long-neglected, excluded sectors of the population can enhance participation and representation (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 80–86).

Going even further, advocates of discourse analysis point to spontaneous mass mobilizations ranging from Arab Spring protests to Spain's *indignados* and Occupy Wall Street as promising examples of autonomous, leaderless forces for the participatory renovation of stodgy, elite-dominated democracies (Gerbaudo 2017; Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis 2019; Kioupkiolis 2019). But these temporary upsurges are spearheaded by well-educated liberal activists who are unrepresentative of 'the people', as the striking electoral failure of Egypt's protesters and the isolation and quick decline of Occupy Wall Street show. Mobilization is only sustained where it forms a movement party. But electoral strategy soon brings the rise of a leader who becomes dominant and, like a typical populist, starts purging internal rivals, as in Spain's Podemos (De Nadal 2021; see in general Böhmelt et al. 2022). Even progressive populism thus fails to escape from the innate tendency toward verticalism highlighted by the political-strategic approach – and therefore does not rejuvenate democracy (Cohen 2019).

In general, the political-strategic approach, which emphasizes the constitutive role of personalistic plebiscitarian leadership and which focuses on what these leaders actually do, argues that populism creates overwhelmingly negative repercussions for democracy. Strong-willed charismatic politicians constantly push toward augmenting their power and therefore try hard to bend or break institutional checks and balances. And they mobilize and maintain mass support with manipulative tactics, such as exaggerated promises, the stoking of resentments and the propagation of conspiracy theories; through this top-down demagoguery and strategic mobilization for their own purposes, they transform bottom-up participation into plebiscitarian acclamation.

The political-strategic approach thus sees populism as a clear danger for democracy. In fact, because in many regions of the world, especially those with dense linkages to the West (see Levitsky and Way 2010), other threats such as military coups have greatly receded (Svolik 2015), populism poses the biggest threat to democracy in the contemporary world. The political-strategic approach thus helps to pinpoint and elucidate the risk that has worried so many recent observers. And by analysing not only the actions and strategies of

populist leaders, but also the institutional and conjunctural conditions under which their power-hungry machinations can be successful, this approach facilitates a fairly clear, thorough grasp of the effective danger to democracy (Weyland 2020, 2022). By explaining the actual threat, the political-strategic approach also helps design the countermeasures with which liberal-democratic forces can contain populism. Under what circumstances, for instance, are institutional strategies, especially reliance on constitutional checks and balances and on electoral contestation, most promising; and when are extra-institutional tactics and mass protests the only still-available, albeit risky, means?

For these important reasons, the political-strategic approach is more promising than ideational alternatives, both for academic analysis and for lesson-drawing that can inform pro-democratic action.

INSIGHTS ON POPULIST GOVERNMENT AND GOVERNANCE

Based on its conceptual advantages, the analytical pay-offs of the political-strategic approach have become even more pronounced with populism's worldwide advance in recent years.³ Now that personalistic plebiscitarian leaders have won elections and become chief executives in so many countries, a focus on their actual behaviour has turned crucial for understanding the politics of populism. In Latin America, where charismatic politicians have for decades captured government power on numerous occasions, the political-strategic approach has long prevailed (see, e.g. Taggart 2000: 59–66). Now its advantages are becoming obvious in other regions such as Europe and Asia, where more and more populist politicians have won chief executive office in the new millennium. Consequently, it is urgent to investigate what these personalistic plebiscitarian leaders do with their new power, and what the political-institutional repercussions are, particularly for democracy – the special concerns of the political-strategic approach.

When populist movements and parties were initially emerging and then rising in the electorate, as they slowly did in Europe from the 1970s onward, ideational, ideological and discourse approaches, which concentrate on the input side of politics, held considerable analytical leverage by examining how and why populist preferences formed among voters and how these attitudes gave birth to new parties (though only together with other sentiments and resentments). During this early stage of populist ascendance in the Old Continent, ideational frameworks therefore found growing numbers of adherents.

But ideational approaches do not concentrate on how victorious populists govern and how, and under what conditions, their constant efforts to augment their power undermine democracy. By contrast, the political-strategic approach is well suited for elucidating these crucial issues, which now take centre stage. It concentrates specifically on investigating how personalistic plebiscitarian politicians define and pursue their political goals; what tactics and strategies they employ in promoting these objectives; how they garner support with a variety of means; and what the political and institutional consequences of all these actions are.

For these purposes of political-institutional analysis, the political-strategic approach has great heuristic value by developing a host of interesting conjectures and hypotheses. The centrality of personalistic leadership suggests, for instance, that populist chief executives surround themselves with loyalists and cronies, not experts or party politicians; that they weaken government institutions and bureaucracies through incessant political interference; that they

constantly bend or break institutional checks and balances; that they energetically concentrate and extend their power; that they enact bold, high-profile measures that lack careful preparation and fiscal sustainability – at the risk of quick failure and potential disaster; that they shun firm alliances with independent power brokers; that coalitions, which are unavoidable, especially in Europe’s parliamentary systems, remain precarious and prone to breakdown; that leaders’ inherent penchant for confrontation and conflict creates high risks of political collapse and irregular removal from office; that where populist chief executives win confrontations, they gradually strangle democracy; that to garner support for this authoritarian involution, they act in constant campaign mode; and many ideas more.

With its focus on the main axis of populism, namely personalistic plebiscitarian leadership, the political-strategic approach develops all these insights into populist politics and governance and emphasizes their problematic regime effects. By contrast, ideological and discourse approaches have – as their advocates admit (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 533–534) – little to say about leaders’ strategic actions and their repercussions.

While the political-strategic approach highlights the centrality of populist agency, it does not fall into the trap of voluntarism, but systematically examines contextual conditions. In this way, it elucidates the circumstances in which personalistic plebiscitarian leaders can achieve their goals; and when they face hindrances, if not insurmountable obstacles to their ambitions. The political-strategic approach is thus crucial for explaining the differential political success of populist leaders – why some of them establish political hegemony and move toward ever more authoritarian rule, whereas others fail to bend or break liberal-democratic checks and balances and yet others fall prey to polarization and conflict and suffer premature eviction from office (see Weyland 2022). Understanding the varied fate of populist chief executives is crucial, in turn, for explaining the survival chances of democracy.

In all these ways, the political-strategic approach yields counterintuitive insights that alternative frameworks do not perceive. For instance, whereas mainstream researchers depict crises as naturally bad for governments (e.g. Nelson 2018: 1, 31), the political-strategic approach highlights the opportunities that such challenges can offer to populist leaders: bold agency can quickly resolve certain types of crises such as hyperinflation – and thus elicit an enormous outpouring of support, which then facilitates assaults on democracy, as under Peruvian populist Alberto Fujimori in the 1990s (Weyland 2020: 396–401).

Not all crises are resolvable, however, as the COVID-19 pandemic showed: whereas drastic adjustment programmes can stop hyperinflation right away, there is no way to wipe out the hypercontagious disease vector. Such stubborn, not rapidly eliminable problems create a stark dilemma for populist leaders: persistent crises threaten to reveal the fundamental claim and promise of charismatic authority – to command extraordinary gifts and act as saviour of the people – as hollow and vacuous (Weyland 2022: 23–24). Interestingly, populist leaders respond by conjuring political magic. They try to wish away the unresolvable problem by denying its severity – ‘just a little cold’, as Brazil’s Bolsonaro downplayed; by promoting miraculous, yet actually ineffective or even counterproductive cures (e.g. hydroxychloroquine); and by deflecting responsibility through the propagation of conspiracy theories.

Because this desperate, counterproductive flailing predictably fails to yield improvements, populists’ approval ratings sooner or later suffer and their plebiscitarian mass support eventually shrinks (Bayerlein et al. 2021). This weakening puts personalistic leaders on the defensive and risks their self-perpetuation in office. In fact, their heavily questioned performance in the pandemic contributed to the excruciatingly narrow re-election defeats of Trump in 2020 and

Bolsonaro in 2022. By elucidating these differential responses to crises, their impact on the political standing of populist chief executives and the resulting repercussions for democracy, the political-strategic approach, with its theoretical inspiration in Weber's concept of charisma, proves its analytical usefulness.

As another indication of its analytical pay-offs, the political-strategic approach can explain the puzzle of dramatic turnarounds in populist leaders' fate: built on uninstitutionalized and therefore precarious mass support, apparently successful populists can quickly fall. For instance, Fujimori won a second re-election in mid-2000, yet shortly thereafter, his totally personalistic government collapsed like a house of cards; and Evo Morales seemed headed toward continuous re-election in late 2019, but was evicted through massive citizen protests over electoral fraud (Wolff 2020; on evidence of fraud: 170–175).

Moreover, with its focus on political-institutional factors, the political-strategic approach explains why the frequent irregular evictions of populist leaders in presidential systems of government, driven by mass protest and accompanied by enormous controversy, forestall comebacks. In recent decades, none of Latin America's personalistic plebiscitarian politicians who suffered eviction have managed to return to the presidency. By contrast, parliamentary systems as in Europe allow for the easier, less conflictual removal of populist leaders through coalition crises or no-confidence votes. Less damaging to prime ministers' political standing, such ousters have allowed for comebacks. Accordingly, Silvio Berlusconi in Italy and Vladimír Mečiar in Slovakia, among others, recaptured the premiership on two later occasions, as a new investigation based on the political-strategic approach highlights (Weyland 2022: 36–39).

POPULISM'S THREAT TO DEMOCRACY: HOW SEVERE?

The analytical advantages of the political-strategic approach come together in elucidating the current fate of democracy in the world, one of the main tasks of contemporary political science in this age of anxiety. As mentioned above, in most regions, the principal threat to liberal pluralism no longer emanates from coup-hungry militaries or radical guerrilla movements, but from elected chief executives who are tempted to abuse their power, push for supremacy, throttle competitiveness and thus suffocate democracy from the inside (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Svobik 2015). Because personalistic plebiscitarian politicians are particularly eager and able to pursue this undemocratic power concentration, this internal threat arises primarily from populism.

By focusing on political action and its institutional preconditions and consequences, the political-strategic approach is particularly well positioned for assessing the effective risk of this populist self-destruction of democracy. This assessment starts from the definitional implication that personalistic plebiscitarian leaders inherently try to concentrate power. But empirical investigations show that these authoritarian machinations often do not succeed. The main source of variation lies in the different contextual conditions that populist chief executives face.

What context factors are especially important? The political-strategic definition provides decisive clues by highlighting two main types of factors. First, personalistic leadership automatically stands in tension with strong institutions; consequently, institutional weakness constitutes a necessary condition for populist power concentration. Second, populist leadership

rests on plebiscitarian support, which assumes massive breadth and overwhelming weight only under favourable conjunctural conditions: populist leaders win irresistible clout as saviours of the people if they manage to overcome drastic and severe, yet resolvable, crises such as hyperinflation (as mentioned above); or if they benefit from huge revenue windfalls that enable them to obtain, even ‘buy’, vast backing.

Empirical research grounded in the political-strategic approach demonstrates how these institutional and conjunctural conditions interact to enable only a minority of populist chief executives to achieve illiberal power concentration and suffocate democracy. In most instances, by contrast, liberal pluralism is sustained by institutional resilience; or the absence of conjunctural opportunities prevents populist leaders from winning the massive support that could enable them to push aside institutionally fragile checks and balances (Weyland 2020; see also Weyland 2022). This theoretical argument provides a systematic explanation for empirical findings about populism’s lethality to democracy that correspond to the results of various statistical analyses (e.g. Kyle and Mounk 2018: 17; Ruth-Lovell et al. 2019: 9).

By elucidating populism’s inherent threat to democracy, yet also demonstrating the resilience of many democracies across the world, the political-strategic approach makes a crucial contribution to answering one of the most pressing questions of contemporary political science: What is the effective vulnerability of democracy to the new risks arising in the third millennium? As the political-strategic approach emphasizes, it is crucial to take populist agency seriously and investigate the eager machinations with which personalistic plebiscitarian leaders constantly seek to augment their power. And it is equally crucial to recognize that this power concentration can proceed only in certain institutional settings and under specific conjunctural conditions. Consequently, liberal pluralism is not as precarious and weak as extant analyses suggest and worried observers fear (e.g. Kaufman and Haggard 2019; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

All of these interesting insights about politics, governance and their regime effects emerge from the political-strategic approach, whereas alternative approaches lack this heuristic value. Actions are decisive, not discourse (Kenny forthcoming; see also Roberts 2006). With the emergence of so many populist governments, the political-strategic approach’s focus on the quest for and exercise of power has become even more important and valuable. In sum, the analytical pay-off and promise of the political-strategic approach are particularly important during the current wave of populism.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has explained the theoretical core and highlighted the heuristic value of the political-strategic approach to populism, whose analytical benefits have further increased with the global advance of personalistic plebiscitarian leadership. Now that populist politicians hold chief executive office in a growing number of countries, it is even more important to concentrate on their actual decisions and political actions and on the political-institutional effects of their typically populist strategies and tactics. By contrast, ideational and discursive approaches focus too much on discourses and thin ideologies – on speeches and performances – rather than on what is decisive in politics, namely action.

Ideational approaches also draw a misleading picture of populism, which promises to empower the people. In political reality, however, the amorphous, heterogeneous mass of ‘the

people' cannot act in any coherent, goal-oriented fashion; instead, they automatically vest their agency in an outstanding leader, whose charismatic authority claims to incarnate the people and automatically represent and advance their interests (Urbinati 2019). This inherent identification of the leader and the people, based on the idea of providential anointment, effectively gives the leader free rein to act as she or he sees fit. Thus, populism really revolves around unbounded agency and top-down domination.

By its very nature, therefore, populism poses a serious threat to democracy. Fortunately, however, the political-strategic approach shows that populism's dangerous agency can only achieve its illiberal goals under specific conditions, which often do not prevail, even in many of the countries where personalistic plebiscitarian leaders succeed in winning elections. Therefore, the political-strategic approach suggests that even in this era of populism, democracy's prospects are not as dire as contemporary observers have warned.

NOTES

1. This chapter draws heavily on Weyland (2001, 2017, 2020, 2021, 2022).
2. Space constraints preclude a discussion of the nuances of and differences among the variegated approaches in this ample, internally divergent family of conceptualizations.
3. This section draws very heavily on Weyland (2021).

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14. The ideational approach to populism

Lisa Zanotti¹

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, populism has been a hot topic both in academia and in the public debate. Among the different conceptual definitions that scholars and pundits have developed, the so-called ideational approach focuses on the ideas of populist actors (Hawkins 2009; Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Stanley 2008). All the definitions that fall under this broader framework have two main features. First, they conceive society as divided into two opposed and homogeneous groups, the ‘pure’ people and the ‘corrupt’ elite. The main difference between these two groups is moral. While the former is perceived as morally good, the latter is seen as evil because it does not act accordingly to the people’s interest or will. The second core element of the ideational approach is that populists maintain that politics should express the general will (*volonté générale*) of the people. This chapter aims at describing the main features of the ideational approach to populism and its origins, discussing its similarities and differences with other approaches, as well as assessing its strengths and limitations. Among the definitions that fall under the umbrella of the ideational approach, the one that defines populism as a thin-centred ideology in particular stands out. This definition was first put forward by Cas Mudde (2004) and has since been largely employed in seminal research on populism (Hawkins 2010; Hawkins et al. 2017; Mudde 2019; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Stanley 2008, 2011). Following Giovanni Sartori (1970), this can be defined as a minimum definition as it seeks to reflect the lowest common denominator among all manifestations of a given phenomenon. This allows Mudde’s definition to capture the common and constant core of every manifestation of populism throughout history and across different regions. The main advantages of this approach are four-fold: it allows (1) to distinguish between populism and non-populism; (2) to assess different types of populism depending on the host ideology that associates with populism; (3) to tackle both supply and demand; and (4) to go beyond the manifestation of populism as linked to a charismatic leader. However, scholars mainly coming from a discursive tradition have criticized two aspects of this definition: the conceptualization of ‘the people’ as a *moral* and *homogeneous* entity.

The chapter is structured as follows. In the first section, I trace the intellectual and theoretical roots of the ideational approach to provide a sense of the genealogy that leads to the crystallization of the theory in its now well-known form. I then outline the features of the ideational approach to populism focusing on Mudde’s approach that conceives populism as a thin-centred ideology featuring a moral understanding of the people and the elite, and politics as general will. The second section is dedicated to the main advantages of this approach and the third to its limitations. Finally, I draw some conclusions.

WHAT IS POPULISM?

Even if populism, to a certain extent, is still a contested concept, it is also true that the ideational definition has become widely popular among scholars of political science. In general terms, scholars employing this approach focus on one central feature of populism: its ideas (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). More specifically, populist actors are described as sharing a ‘way of seeing the political world as a Manichean struggle between the will of the people and an evil, conspiring elite’ (Hawkins et al. 2018: 2). As Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser has pointed out, populism is ‘first and foremost a moral worldview that is used to both criticize the establishment and construct a romanticized view of the people’ (2014: 475).

Among these definitions, the one that depicts populism as a thin-centred ideology stands out, becoming quite widespread (Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008). This definition describes populism as an ‘ideology that considers society ultimately divided into two homogeneous groups the “pure” people versus the “corrupt” elite, and which argues that politics should be the expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’ (Mudde 2004: 543; see also Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012, 2017). Minimal definitions of concepts such as Mudde’s are intended to exclude accompanying or varying properties, whose relation to the core concept seems more productively treated as the focus of empirical investigation rather than as a matter of definition (Collier and Gerring 2009: 5).

Ideology is the genus of the concept. Populism is defined as a ‘thin’ ideology that can be associated with host ideologies that can be ‘thick’ or ‘full’, such as communism, socialism or fascism, or ‘thin’ ones, such as nationalism (Mudde 2017: 30; Stanley 2011). Accordingly, the internal barriers that the populist discourse creates differ depending on the type of populism, i.e. the host ideology to which populism cleaves. In other words, populism has a restricted morphology, which necessarily appears attached to – and sometimes even assimilated into – existing ideological families (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013a).

Looking closer at Mudde’s definition, we can outline three main components: people-centrism, anti-elitism and politics as popular sovereignty. First, ‘the people’ are not only pure but also the only legitimate guardians of democracy. In other words, the people are conceived of as a corporate body, and they are assumed to have the same interests and a common will (Canovan 2002). As has been pointed out by scholars and pundits, ‘the people’ does not really exist, instead it is a discursive construction of populists (Mudde 2017). In other words, to employ Ernesto Laclau’s (2005) terminology, the category of the people is an ‘empty signifier’, i.e. an empty container with no clear pre-determined meaning. Even though this is true, Mudde has pointed out that purity – which is a vague and culturally loaded term – still provides a sort of content to the signifier (2017: 52). The main content, however, is provided by the host ideology that accompanies populism. This means that the ‘pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’ are constructed categories that can vary over time and space. Depending on the thick (or thin) ideology to which populism is associated, populists produce different interpretations of ‘the people’. People then become a ‘mythical and constructed sub-set of the whole population’ or ‘an imagined community’ (Mudde 2004: 546).

Consequently, populism’s meaning itself varies with the understanding given to ‘the people’, i.e. to the idealized conception of the community (the heartland) to which it applies (Kriesi 2014; see also Hawkins 2010). In this sense, the people can be interpreted as ‘the working class’, ‘the common people’ or ‘the natives’. Just to give an example, for radical left populists ‘the pure people’ is usually conceived of as the underdogs, all those who do not profit

from the existing economic model and therefore struggle to make ends meet. Yet, depending on the context in which left-wing inclusionary populism operates, it emphasizes certain characteristics of ‘the pure people’, such as the disadvantaged position of citizens living in certain regions of the country (e.g. Die Linke in Germany) or the precarious job situation of young people (e.g. SYRIZA in Greece and Podemos in Spain). On the contrary, populist radical right actors do not always target the same group. For instance, exclusionary populist forces in Western Europe are characterized by presenting the achievements of European civilization against challengers ranging from American popular culture to Islam (Betz 2001: 394). In line with this, exclusionary populists often define the out-group as migrants but also the so-called progressive left and the cultural elite (see Rovira Kaltwasser and Zanotti 2023). Since 9/11, and particularly because of the terrorist attacks perpetrated by the terrorist group Al-Qaeda, the ‘aliens’ have become a more restricted group: Muslims (Betz and Meret 2009). At the same time, exclusionary populist forces in Eastern Europe tend to include Jews as part of ‘the aliens’, something less common in Western Europe (Mudde 2007).

The ‘corrupt elite’ is also a discursive construction. It is worth noting that the adjective ‘corrupt’, referred to the elite, is not to be intended in a monetary sense. Instead, according to populists, the elite is corrupt since it does not fulfil its role of representation, meaning it does not act with the interests of the people in mind. It is worth noting that populists often argue that ‘the elite is not just ignoring the interest of the people; rather they are working against the interest of the country’ (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 13). In other words, as happens for ‘the people’, ‘the elite’ is defined by morality. While ‘the people’ are always good and pure by definition, ‘the elite’ is evil and corrupt. Similarly, with ‘the people’, depending on which enemies populists blame for the condition of the country, we can identify different types of populism. For example, radical right-wing populists attack the political, cultural and/or economic elite for putting the interests of minorities before those of the natives. As Mudde (2013: 7) has pointed out, radical right-wing populists in Western Europe depict the establishment as morally corrupt because elites ‘have hijacked the political system and silenced the voice of the people by making backroom deals and enforcing a conspiracy of silence’. In turn, exclusionary populism in Eastern Europe usually portrays ‘the corrupt elite’ as those powerful actors who controlled the communist regime in the past as well as the (new) liberal establishment that led the transition process in the 1990s (Stanley 2017: 144–148). Despite these differences between Eastern and Western Europe, in recent years the populist radical right in both regions have targeted mainly the European Union (EU), depicting it as a bureaucratic body guilty of taking away decision-making power from the people. However, this was not always the case. In the 1980s, the populist radical right was not against the European Community. It was after the implementation of the Maastricht Treaty and the transformation of the Community into a Union – which meant a broadening of its prerogatives – that things changed. Moreover, in more recent times, the EU has started to push member states to take responsibility for a share of migrants because of the so-called ‘migration crisis’, generating anger in some sectors of the population.

Conversely, for the populist radical left, ‘the corrupt elite’ is generally considered a tiny minority that is very rich and has enough power to control the political system (Damiani 2020; Katsambekis 2016, 2019; Katsambekis and Kioupkioulis 2019; Ramiro and Gomez 2017). In some cases, special emphasis is given to the harmful role of the financial elite, who allegedly spare no effort in evading taxes, thereby undermining the proper functioning of the welfare state. By contrast, in other cases the main enemy is mainstream political parties, which are

portrayed as a cartel of elites (e.g. ‘the caste’) committed to serving its own interests rather than in respecting the will of the people.

In sum, according to the ideational approach, populism is defined as a thin ideology because it is only the confrontation between ‘us’ (the people) and ‘them’ (the elite) that is prominent here. The content of these two categories varies, and it is this variation that allows us to identify different sub-types of populism.

Finally, the third core feature of Mudde’s definition of populism is the ‘general will’, which is closely connected to the homogeneous understanding of the people. In fact, mantling that politics should be the expression of the general will of the people means that populism takes for granted that people are homogeneous, thus arguably suppressing differences of opinions, beliefs and interests as irrelevant and virtually non-existent. Populists maintain that they have the ability to interpret this will and to act accordingly, promoting policies based on common sense, which is supposed to stem from ‘the honest and logical priorities of the (common) people’ (Mudde 2017: 33; see also Betz 1994). Conversely, the elite is seen as the entity that denies this common sense to (allegedly) pursue its own agenda. Not surprisingly, we can observe that populists are prone to enact reforms via constituent assemblies followed by referendums or, more in general, they are in favour of supporting more direct forms of democracy in their critique of representative government (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 17).

While, as mentioned, the thin ideology, or ideational, approach is the most popular among comparativists, it is worth noting that it shares some core elements with other definitions. As Kirk Hawkins and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser have observed, the ‘argument that populism should be defined in ideational terms [is] very similar to the discursive definition used among some Latin Americanists’ (2017: 514). In this sense, the ideational approach to populism is close to the conceptualization of Ernesto Laclau and scholars of the so-called Essex School of discourse analysis (see for example Mouffe 2005; Stavrakakis 2014, 2017). Indeed, both approaches – the Laclauian and the ideational – highlight the popular identity and antagonistic relationship with corrupt elite. This resemblance results in the fact that both approaches in fact normally address cases like *chavismo* in Venezuela, SYRIZA in Greece and Donald Trump in the United States.

However, these two approaches also present some notable differences. The literature highlights three of them. If on the one hand the approach that conceives of populism as an ideology is more prone to enable the generation of empirical knowledge and avoids making normative judgements (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012), the discursive approach carries a more normative stance,² highlighting that the goal of populism would be ‘transforming politics and break[ing] with the liberal status quo’ (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 516).

The second main difference is that Laclauians tend to see populism as the only democratic discourse that is capable of ‘unifying and inspiring large majorities around a transformative project’ (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 516). Mudde’s approach, while considering that populism has a redemptive feature, also considers other types of redemptive discourse, such as pluralist ones.

Finally, seeing populism as an ideology separates from an analytical point of view the existence of populism and its rhetoric from its effects on politics. As Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser have pointed out, this allows to ‘test propositions about the conditions under which populist rhetoric succeeds in its political goals and means that a greater variety of movements and parties can be included under the populist umbrella, including minoritarian radical-right ones that may lack charismatic leadership’ (2017: 516). Laclauian approaches, on the contrary,

‘tend to limit ‘populism to movements that attract a numerical majority’ (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 516). Indeed, Laclau’s notion of discourse blurs the difference between populist ideas and how they play out in the political domain. This becomes a problem since it excludes from the populist umbrella minoritarian movements such as populist radical right political actors without charismatic leadership (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017).³

Having described the main features of the ideational approach to populism, the next section is dedicated to the advantages of this definition. These advantages have to do with the fact that it makes it possible to: (a) distinguish between populists and non-populists; (b) account for both the supply and the demand side; (c) assess different populist phenomena; and (d) acknowledge that the populist ideology can be embodied not only by a charismatic leader but also by other political actors such as political parties and social movements.

THE ADVANTAGES OF THE IDEATIONAL APPROACH: A MINIMAL DEFINITION

As mentioned in the previous section, the ideational approach represents a minimal definition of populism. Minimal definitions, that rely just on the core features of a phenomenon, are amenable to empirical investigation and well suited to underpin a general theory (Pappas 2016). This approach facilitates empirical comparative studies moving beyond single-case studies (Sartori 1970). In fact, comparative studies on populism using the ideational approach have proliferated both in Europe and beyond, with ideational definitions employed in studies of non-European populism (Hawkins et al. 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). Besides being a minimal definition, understanding populism as a thin ideology entails at least four more advantages.

The first has to do with distinguishability, that is the possibility to distinguish populists from non-populists (Mudde 2017). In this sense, Mudde emphasizes that populism has two opposites: elitism and pluralism. On the one hand, elitists reject the idea of politics as the general will of the people, since experts should be in charge, because they know better. In other words, elitism shares populism’s monistic view of society as being divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups but holds an opposite view on the virtues of each group (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013b: 499). Elitists believe that elites/experts are superior in moral, cultural and intellectual terms (Bachrach 2017). On the other hand, pluralists reject populists’ Manichean vision of society, arguing that pluralism means that society is composed of various groups that compete for political power (Gilman 2003). To pluralists, diversity is a strength, and power should be distributed throughout society to prevent specific groups from imposing their will. Following Paulina Ochoa Espejo, the key in distinguishing between populists and pluralists (or liberal democrats) is to determine who the people who legitimize the state are. Pluralism frames its appeal in a way that guarantees and requires that the people be unbounded and open to change, both in practice and in principle. Populists reject any limits on their claims to embody the will of the people (Ochoa Espejo 2015: 61). This difference between populism and pluralism also has to do with openness and self-limitation, because if ‘the people can (and probably will) change, then any appeal to its will is also fallible, temporary and incomplete’ (Ochoa Espejo 2015: 61). One of the examples Ochoa Espejo gives is Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the presidential candidate for the Leftist PRD party in Mexico and leader of the *Coalición por el Bien de Todos* in 2006. When he lost that national election by a thin margin,

he refused to accept the tribunal's ruling. First, he and his supporters engaged in acts of civil disobedience. Later, after rejecting the tribunal's final ruling, he took an alternative oath of office and assumed the title of 'Legitimate President', organizing a 'shadow' government (Ochoa Espejo 2015: 79).

The second advantage of conceiving populism as a thin ideology is that it can account for both the supply and demand levels. While scholars advocating a political-strategic approach have described populism as a top-down strategy in which charismatic leaders mobilize unorganized masses (Roberts 2006; Weyland 2001), the ideational approach allows for the examination of both the supply side – the populist leaders or parties – with the demand side – the activation of populist attitudes in the electorate (Rovira Kaltwasser and Zanotti 2021: 43). The demand side is related to structural changes, which contribute to activating populist attitudes in the masses, while the supply side refers to those conditions that favour the performance of populist actors in the political and electoral arena (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 99). In fact, for populists to become electorally relevant, there needs to be a demand for populism and, at the same time, there must be a supply of credible populist alternatives. In turn, observing the populist phenomenon from both these perspectives helps to acquire a more in-depth understanding of both the causes of populist episodes and the costs and benefits of democratic responses to populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 20).

The third strength of the ideational approach to populism relies on its ability to categorize different populist phenomena. Conceptualizing populism as a thin ideology that goes in hand with other 'host' ideologies allows us to distinguish and categorize different types of populism. Because of its slim ideological core, populism often needs to attach to other concepts or ideologies such as socialism, nativism, producerism, nationalism, etc. In this sense, scholars have introduced categories such as exclusionary and inclusionary populism to better reflect such combinations and the resulting sub-types. This distinction has become increasingly common in the academic literature, since it helps to characterize the two different versions of populism that are predominant in the contemporary world. This distinction is based on three dimensions of inclusion/exclusion: material, political and symbolic (Filc 2010; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013a). Even if right-wing and left-wing populism share both exclusionary and inclusionary features, we can maintain that, in principle, right-wing populism is mainly exclusionary, while left-wing populism is usually inclusionary (Rovira Kaltwasser and Zanotti 2021).

Last, conceptualizing populism as a set of ideas allows us to detach the rise of the phenomenon from the appearance of a charismatic leader (see Weyland 2001). This link between the appearance of a charismatic leader and the emergence of populism seems problematic, since it underestimates the number of cases in which populism appears. More in detail, conceiving populism only in the presence of a charismatic leader seems flawed since it overlooks the fact that in the electorate, there may be demand for populism independently of the presence of a populist leader (see Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Conceiving of populism as an ideology allows acknowledging that different political actors, such as leaders, parties and social movements (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017), can manifest it. This definition, then, conceives of populism as an ideology that is employed by political entrepreneurs but also shared by social groups that have reasons for adhering to this worldview. Conceiving of populism as an ideology means that it is not always expressed in a top-down dynamic. On the contrary, the populist set of ideas is also shared by social groups that have an interest in doing so.

CRITIQUES TO THE IDEATIONAL APPROACH

There are several critiques to Mudde's approach. To begin with, some scholars criticize the definition of populism as an ideology, debating the concept of 'thin ideology' itself. Moreover, other scholars have argued that Mudde's definition is too minimal and not able to adequately 'travel' in order to explain all manifestations of populism. Finally, scholars mainly belonging to the discursive approach and the broader Essex School (see for example Katsambekis 2022) in their assessment focus on two particular aspects of Mudde's definition: the understanding of 'the people' and 'the elite' as morally defined and internally homogeneous groups. In this section, I touch upon each of these points.

As mentioned above, the genus of the ideational approach is ideology. More specifically, populism is understood as a thin-centred ideology (see Mudde 2004; Stanley 2011). Based on the work of Michael Freeden (1996, 1998), thin ideologies are 'ephemeral groupings of political thought displaying low internal integration' and 'a restricted core attached to a narrower range of political concepts' (Aslanidis 2016: 90). Consequently, thin-centred ideologies are unable to provide a 'reasonably broad, if not comprehensive, range of answers to the political questions that societies generate' (Freeden 1998: 750). Populism – conceived as a thin ideology – is different from full or thick ideologies because the latter contain interpretations and configurations of all the major political concepts attached to a general plan of public policy that a specific society requires (Stanley 2008; Zanotti 2021). However, critics have focused on the very idea of thin ideologies as 'conceptually spurious' (Aslanidis 2016: 89). In Aslanidis' words 'almost any political notion can acquire the status of a thin-centred ideology as long as it contains an alleged small number of core concepts that the claimant perceives as being unable to supply a comprehensive package of policy proposals' (2016: 91).

Another critique focuses on the applicability of thin centrism to populism. According to Michael Freeden, the reasons for which populism does not conform to the thin-centred ideological variant are two: one substantive and one morphological. The first reason has to do with the fact that thin ideologies such as feminism or nationalism, 'although curtailed, are nonetheless well-articulated and the product of long processes of measured and reflective political thinking'. Second, while thin ideologies can become thick if they incorporate existing elements of other ideologies, the truncated nature of populisms seldom evinces such aspirations or potential (Freeden 2016: 3).

Besides underlying the limitations of conceiving populism as a thin-centred ideology, other scholars focus their criticism on the fact that Mudde's definition has limitations with respect to its ability to travel to different contexts. The ideational approach has improved the analysis of populism preserving only the core characteristics. However, relying on minimal definitions allows us to compare a much broader set of cases but it also limits the specificity of the different cases. This argument is at the core of Sartori's ladder of abstraction, according to which 'we make a concept more abstract and more general by lessening its properties or attributes. Conversely, a concept is specified by the addition (or unfolding) of qualifications, i.e. by augmenting its attributes or properties' (Sartori 1970: 1041). In this line, Carlos De la Torre and Gianpietro Mazzoleni maintain that Cas Mudde's 'conceptualization is an obstacle to grasp the complexity of populism in its diverse manifestations over space and time' (2019: 79). They rely on the fact that the defining genus of populism (the moral definition of the contraposition between the people and the elite, and politics as popular sovereignty) would miss (other) key components of populism such as styles of communication or the type of leadership. With

respect to the latter, De la Torre and Mazzoleni claim that ‘whilst Mudde’s concept works well to explain a particular subtype of populism (small right-wing parties in the margins of European politics) it does not travel well to other world areas or help to explain mass-based populist parties in Europe’ (2019: 80). Among other critiques, this one seems to be the least justified, since one of the broadly recognized merits of Mudde’s approach is to be able to go beyond the existence of a charismatic leader. On the contrary, the ideational approach operates on the premise that populism does not go in hand with any specific organizational structure; it can be embodied by parties, leaders and social movements, or different combinations of them (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017).

As mentioned above, the main difference between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ according to the ideational approach is moral. This means that the only content that the two categories enclose is morality. The people are pure, and the elite is corrupt, since it does not act accordingly with the interests of the people. In this sense, Laclau’s understanding of the people and the elite as empty signifiers is only partially accepted by ideational scholars, since populism, for them, is essentially based on a *moral* divide which *does* provide some content to the signifier (Mudde 2017). In sum, Mudde argues that populists view the people as virtuous and the elite as corrupt. However, some scholars have pointed out that not all populist constructs of the people appeal to morality; some focus primarily on politics and socio-economic exclusions (De la Torre and Mazzoleni 2019). To give an example, Giorgos Katsambekis (2016) pointed out that SYRIZA’s notions of the people and its enemies are more political than moral. Another critique in this sense comes from Pierre Ostiguy (2017), who observes that in Latin American populism, the people are not always constructed as a morally pure entity. Ostiguy provides the example of Hugo Chávez, highlighting that the concept of the purity of the people does not appear in any of Chávez’s innumerable speeches (2017). However, it is worth noting that even if Chávez did not refer to the people explicitly as ‘pure’, he did mention the election as a contest between good and evil where the opposition represents ‘the Devil himself’ while the forces allied with the Bolivarian cause are identified with Christ (Hawkins 2009: 1043). Finally, as pointed out by Seongcheol Kim (2022: 496), the ‘emphasis on moralism has been criticized by post-foundational scholars who argue that moralism is neither specific to populism nor even a consistent feature of discourses that otherwise fit the people versus elite criterion for populism’ (see also Katsambekis 2022; Stavrakakis and Jäger 2018).

The last main critique to the conceptualization of populism as a thin-centred ideology is relative to the understanding of the people as an essentially homogenous entity (Stavrakakis and Jäger 2017; Katsambekis 2022). According to ideational scholars, populism is seen as essentially non-pluralist, since pluralism ‘recognizes minorities, individuals and fragmented groups, and finds it impossible to achieve a unified general will’ (Katsambekis 2022: 60). Behind this interpretation, there is the belief that populists’ understanding of the general will coincides with the will of the majority. Conversely, pluralism respects ‘formal rights and liberties and it treats opponents with courtesy, as legitimate political actors’, while respecting minorities rights as a complement of the majority rule (Hawkins 2009: 1064). As Hawkins (2009) has pointed out, the populist notion of the general will comes from the work of Rousseau, who refers to the term *volonté générale* as the capacity of the people to join into a community and legislate to enforce their common interest. It ascribes virtue to the views and collective traditions of common, ordinary folk, who are seen as the overwhelming majority (see also Wiles 1969). One example is the use of the notion of ‘silent majority’ by right-wing populists mainly in the United States.⁴ In this sense, populist radical right parties present themselves ‘as

the voice of the people-as-underdog and legitimize their exclusionary nationalist demands as the will of the (silent) majority turning the signifier democracy against the liberal democratic rights of minorities i.e. people of foreign descent' (De Cleen 2017: 344). For scholars from the discursive approach, the main problem with the understanding of populism as anti-pluralist is that it leaves aside most political actors on the left of the political spectrum which the same ideational scholars identify as populists, such as SYRIZA in Greece and Podemos in Spain (Katsambekis 2022: 60). With respect to this critique, it is worth noting that scholars who work with the ideational definition of populism observe that while it is true that populists may talk about celebrating differences of opinion, 'these differences are only permissible among those identified as members of "the people"' (Hawkins 2016: 323).

CONCLUSION

This chapter addressed the characteristics of the ideational approach to populism, its strengths and its limitations. This definition is based on two core components. First, populism entails a juxtaposition of two homogeneous and morally defined groups, the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite'. Second, populists think that politics should be the expression of the general will of the people. Intended as a thin-centred ideology, populism has some common elements with the discursive approach of Laclau, namely its dichotomic outlook, the centrality of the people and the popular will, but it differs on the ideational focus on ideology, moralization and homogenization.

Minimum definitions – such as this one – have the advantage that they can 'travel', i.e. they are useful to compare phenomena over time and space, facilitating comparative research. In addition, conceiving populism as a thin-centred ideology gives us the possibility to distinguish operationally populists from non-populists. Also, the ideational definition allows us to observe the phenomenon both from the supply and the demand side. Further, this approach facilitates the rigorous categorization of different populist phenomena, underlying the presence of different sub-types of populism depending on the host ideology. Finally, the ideational approach allows acknowledging that the populist ideology can be embodied not only by a charismatic leader but also by other political actors such as political parties and social movements.

Even though the ideational definition of populism is very broadly used, it is worth noting that different critiques have arisen. Beside the discursive scholars' critique on the understanding of 'the people' as pure and homogeneous, other scholars have focused on the allegedly spurious connotations of thin ideologies and on the limited potential of the ideational approach in assessing particular manifestations of the populist phenomenon.

NOTES

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2. For a critique on the normative stance of the discursive approach see Kim (2022).
3. It is worth noting that contemporary Laclauian scholars have analysed cases of 'minoritarian populism' (see for example Katsambekis 2016; Kim 2021).

4. The term ‘silent majority’ was used by former United States president Richard Nixon to describe ‘an aggrieved White majority squeezed by both the untruly dependent poor below and government elites above’ (Lowndes 2008).

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15. The socio-cultural approach: toward a cultural class analysis of populist appeals

Linus Westheuser and Pierre Ostiguy

INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING POPULISM'S ALLURE

We cannot understand populism without understanding its allure. Populist politics stimulate the imagination, not only of its adherents but also of observers who abhor it – and yet cannot avert their eyes. ‘You won’t believe what he just did’, was the refrain of the Trump presidency, accompanying a steady stream of episodes leaving one side shaking their heads in disbelief and the other side laughing. This chapter develops an approach to the study of populism which helps us understand where this allure comes from and what it accomplishes. We show how the emotive *mélange* of mediatized excitement and indignation, fascination and fear is not accidental to the populist phenomenon, but indeed goes to the very core of its political mode of functioning. Further, we explore the *social embeddedness* of populist appeals. Populism, we suggest, can become a point of intense fascination because it antagonistically performs on the stage of big politics something that is not supposed to be there: the socially devalued ways of a significant part of non-elite society.

Populism, in this perspective, stands for a repertoire of transgressive performances, in which the social norms and cultural precepts of ‘standard’, ‘polite’, procedural and institutional politics are overstepped (see also Aiolfi 2022). Transgressing the rules of ordinary politics, populists contrast institutional norms of propriety to the authentic alterity of the people, which the institutional powers that be have ceased to understand. In this way, populist leaders seek to display the promise of a more immediate embodiment of the people than is provided by existing representative democracy. A media environment geared towards monetizing affect greatly amplifies populist performances. Yet, the reasons for the success of the populist style lie deeper than media showmanship. By using a plebeian grammar of expression and vindicating the ‘low’ side of both politics and socio-cultural stratification, populism taps into experiences of social devaluation, symbolic violence and political exclusion shared by a sizeable strata within contemporary societies. Refusing to play by the rules, populist performances transgress latent boundaries and hierarchies implicit in the institutional realities of ‘normal’ politics and its relation to ordinary citizens.

This chapter reviews these and related insights gleaned by studies often grouped together under the label of the *socio-cultural approach to populism*, an approach at times also termed *relational* or *performative*. In the first section, we show that all three terms have their merits, as each stands for a central aspect of populism as observed by socio-cultural approaches. In the second section, we elucidate the specific relational grammar of populist performances hinging on the revaluation of cultural elements designated as ‘low’. Here we also provide a definition of the high–low opposition in politics that is essential to understanding populist appeals. Third, we review works by a diverse set of authors who have adopted or expanded the socio-cultural approach around the globe. Last, we explore the much-neglected sociological underpinnings

of the populist style and the high–low opposition. We highlight the potential for expanding current research on the populist style beyond leaders’ performances and towards a fully fledged *sociology of populist appeals*. For this we call for a deepened engagement of populism studies with Bourdieusian cultural class analysis.

UNPACKING THE POPULIST STYLE: PERFORMATIVITY AS REPRESENTATION

Socio-cultural approaches understand populism primarily as a *mode of doing* politics, and only secondarily as a system of thought. This can provide a corrective to the cognitive focus of the ideational approach currently dominating the field. While some populists may indeed subscribe to a belief system formed around the idea of a ‘*volonté générale*’ or a moral theory of purity and corruption (as described by Mudde 2004), in practice, the beliefs of populist adherents vary widely, and populist parties also succeed in capturing groups lacking coherent ideological beliefs, however thin. An alternative perspective ties populist success to the effectiveness of *appeals* by which populist leaders lay claim to representing the authentic and devalued people against elites and nefarious social others. This entails a subtle shift of focus, away from explaining beliefs in populist ideology to explaining how populist appeals – i.e. ways of ‘doing populism’ – work and why they resonate.

More specifically, socio-cultural approaches highlight ‘the relational, performative role that populist appeals play in relating to their publics, and in the constitution of popular identities’ (Ostiguy et al. 2021: 2). The terms ‘socio-cultural’, ‘relational’ and ‘performative’ here signal different elements of the populist mode of doing politics. Firstly, populism is understood as a *style* of political appeals, that is, a culturally mediated form of political practice, a way of being and presenting oneself in the political public (*socio-cultural* element). Secondly, populism is analysed as a mode of establishing *relations* between citizens and politics, while tapping into existing social fault lines (*relational* element). Thirdly, populism is viewed as engaging in a form of political *representation* that contributes to the constitution of the very people it invokes and whose political identity it elaborates (*performative* element).

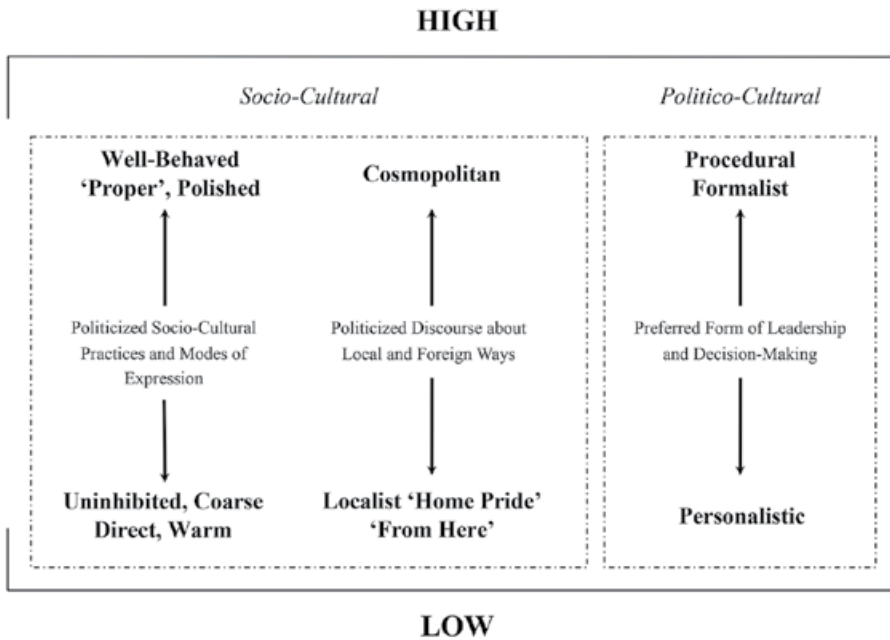
The socio-cultural study of populist appeals is not a ‘cultural studies add-on’ to political science approaches but offers a lens for analysing the populist phenomenon as a whole. Socio-cultural approaches treat populism as one specific form of ‘politics as symbolic action’ (Edelman 1971). Style is then not understood as ‘mere rhetoric’, or as a garnish on top of a deeper ideological core. Instead, performance, rhetoric and style are themselves thought to embody a relevant dimension of politics (Moffitt 2016: ch. 3). Political style stands for the way in which politics is conducted and relations of identification are established. The populist style in particular engages a logic of *performativity as representation*, whereby practices of representation constitute the political identities they claim to represent (Disch 2011). An important dynamic in that light is the way populist leaders seek to *embody* ‘the people’ they represent by emulating and dramatically accentuating traits of popular self-ideals. This does not draw only on words but also on demeanours and forms of public self-presentation, e.g. as straightforward, folksy, virile or angry, but also as parental, exalted, loving or melodramatic. Similarly, populist performativity delineates relations between social groups, such as those articulated in the opposition between ‘the people’, ‘the political class’ and varying forms of the ‘social other’, whether migrants, rich oligarchs or foreign powers (Ostiguy and Casullo 2017).

Applications of the socio-cultural approach then reconstruct the specifically populist style of articulating appeals and relating to voters, opponents and the norms of the political arena. Further, studying the ‘populist experience’ allows us to see that populism involves a peculiar language (including accents, intonations, shorthands, etc.) and a particular genre of bodily behaviour and gestures, that is, at the most generic level, a form of public praxis. Populism is a way of being and of behaving. To descriptively document the populist style, analysts gather public appearances; embodied forms of conduct and body language, including through second-degree depictions such as memes or cartoons; as well as speech, at the lexical (which terms populists use), socio-linguistic (how they speak) and rhetorical levels.

Performances are interpreted as so many ways by which leaders symbolize and dramatize core elements of populism: their closeness to the people and the promise of immediate representation, as well as their disruptive role vis-à-vis oligarchic or established institutional politics. To interpret the performances, they must also be linked to the cultural horizon of target audiences. Understanding the significance of populist performances therefore requires an understanding of the deeper structures of cultural differentiation that audiences know often only implicitly. These structures include the expected norms of conduct in political institutions and the political style of established, non-populist actors. Further, they often include popular or locally specific cultural repertoires that enjoy historical resonance but are not incorporated into the established political language. Because it touches upon social relations of devaluation and misrecognition, populist appeals also have a sociological resonance. As spelt out in the following section, a systematic and comparative study of the stylistic repertoire of populist performances reveals not only typical patterns, but also the social relations between politics and popular identities that this language mobilizes.

THE HIGH AND THE LOW: CORE CHARACTERISTICS OF POPULIST APPEALS

The first task is to define core characteristics of populist appeals beyond the minimal criterion of an appeal to ‘the people’. Ostiguy (2017) states that populism centrally involves a conspicuous display or ‘flaunting’ of the socio-cultural and politico-cultural *low*, in an antagonistic relation to the *high*.¹ In a socio-cultural sense, the low stands for the *popular* and ‘*from here*’, which have been disregarded in the polity. In a politico-cultural sense, the low stands for *personalistic* forms of linkage, authority and political identification. Figure 15.1 summarizes these three often intertwined defining features of populist appeals:



Source: Adapted from Ostiguy 2017.

Figure 15.1 Key features of the high–low polarity

1. *(Culturally) popular*: A first component, closely linked to the notion of *habitus* developed by Bourdieu (1984), encompasses manners, demeanours, ways of speaking and dressing, vocabulary and tastes displayed in public. Akin to the divide between high- and low-brow art, the ‘low’ here stands for the culturally popular side of a hierarchy of cultural stratification, i.e. cultural forms devalued as parochial, unsophisticated and ordinary. Markers of the socio-cultural low may include slang or folksy expressions and metaphors, presentations of the self as uninhibited, direct and authentic. Populist politicians use these to mark an antagonistic contrast to the ‘high’ pole of politics and society, which is marked by a proper, composed, learned and polished demeanour. Politicians on the high are often well-mannered and self-restrained in their public self-presentation, with their discourse ‘officialized’ (Bourdieu 1991), in the sense of conspicuously mastering the jargon of expertise and institutional conventions. Negatively, they can appear as stiff, rigid, colourless, distant, boring or cold.
2. *From here*: A second component, which is equally socio-cultural, and which is often projected by similar markers, emphasizes in its appeals the ‘from here’ in contrast with a ‘high’ sense of cosmopolitanism and urbaneness. Indeed, populism is *never* only about ‘the people’ generically, but about ‘the people *from here*’, this *pueblo*, ‘our’ people. Those references, on the low, are about a culturally bounded and locally developed repertoire, often

revolving around ideas of a ‘heartland’ (Taggart 2000) and its paraphernalia. There is thus an emphasis, on the populist ‘low’, on the ‘from here’, on localist frames and repertoires, on fervent ‘home pride’. This localism *can* be elaborated in terms of nativist ideology, but the two are distinct. Here again the difference between a folksy, locally rooted *style* and ideological *belief systems* centred on national descent are important.

3. *Personalistic*: Third, pertaining to matters of political leadership, decision making and the institutional field of politics, the ‘high’ claims to favour procedural, formal, impersonal, legalistic, institutionally mediated models of authority, while the ‘low’ favours personalism and ‘personalized’ problem solving. A good approximation of this third sense of the high–low polarity consists in the opposition between personalistic or, at the extreme, charismatic authority, and formal, procedural authority akin to Max Weber’s notion of legal rationalism. Thus, the high generally claims to represent procedural ‘normalcy’ (at least as a goal to be achieved) in the conduct of public life, along with formal and generalizable procedures in public administration; while the personalist low political style is centred on leaders claiming authority by virtue of their closeness to ‘the people’ and their reciprocated ‘love’ for them.

These three defining components of the high–low polarity build on a shared opposition between *immediacy and embodiment* in the practice of political representation, on the ‘low’, versus *sublimation and mediation*, on the ‘high’. In public appearances, ‘low’ transgressions of the behavioural and discursive standards of ‘high politics’ are the populist mark – provoking identification among some and consternation among others. Often these involve displays of the body violating the rules of the rationalized, sublimated sphere of institutional politics, and instances in which the leader becomes the incarnation of the coarse ‘from here’, personally ‘taking care of things’ (Ostiguy and Moffitt 2021: 59f.) amidst perceived institutional failure. Casullo has empirically analysed bodily choreographies of gestures, mannerisms and, in a South American context, clothing, highlighting that ‘populism involves a certain bodily communicative grammar that is constructed through the leader’s behavior, voice, demeanor, clothing, hairstyle, and the like’ (Casullo 2021: 75; see also Ostiguy 2009). Following Moffitt’s dichotomy between technocracy and populism (2016: 46f.), Diehl argues that technocracy, by contrast, involves body codes that ‘suggest professionalization and a certain distance between the office holder and voter’ (2017: 367). One can thus speak of a spectrum from embodiment to disembodiment. While non-populist politicians tend to move towards the pole of embodiment usually in select instances around electoral campaigns, populists often remain in the mode of embodiment and campaigning perpetually.

THE GLOBAL POLITICS OF THE LOW: A LITERATURE REVIEW

In the following, we provide – to our knowledge for the first time – an overview of some important works from across the globe that have empirically developed or applied the socio-cultural tradition of populism research.² This tradition, arising first in the 1990s, has been spreading broadly and rapidly across academic fields and world regions, moving from history, political science and political theory into sociology, political communication and cultural studies – thus lending itself to interdisciplinary cooperation.

In the field of political theory, Margaret Canovan's highly influential article 'Trust the People!' first drew attention to the centrality of 'the populist style' and its related 'populist mood': 'Populist appeals to the people are... couched in a *style* aimed at ordinary people [in] a tabloid style' (1999: 5; our emphasis), adding that 'populist politics is not ordinary... politics. It has the *revivalist* flavour of a movement', with an 'extra emotional ingredient'. 'Personalized leadership is... corollary of the reaction against politics-as-usual', with populists celebrating 'a close personal tie between leader and followers' (6). She wished as a theorist 'to place democracy within a wider framework of thinking about contrasting styles of politics' (8). Specifically, Canovan borrowed and modified Oakeshott's concept of a politics of faith, with its 'mobilization of popular enthusiasm', and renamed that style 'redemptive'. Her main thesis is that when institutional liberal democracy becomes ossified and overly technocratic, populism acts as the redemptive face of democracy. As such, it has an anti-institutional impulse. Shortly before, Taguieff (1995: 9) had also explicitly defined populism as a political style and introduced two 'poles of "populist" discourse' (the *protest/social* and the *identitarian*), as well as two features characterizing right-wing populism which can be viewed as generic to populism: *anti-intellectualism* and *hyperpersonalization of the movement*. He emphasized 'the demonization of the "cosmopolitan"' (34) and highlighted populism's desire 'to *abolish the distance* separating the people from the... governing elite' (35). Combining comparative politics and political theory, Panizza (2005, 2017) extensively brought to the fore the analytic question of *identification* so central in the socio-cultural approach.³

In addition, the origins of the socio-cultural approach also go back to the turn to cultural history in historiography and, more broadly, to a renewed attention to symbolically mediated action in social and political analysis from the 1990s onwards. Besides Kazin's (1995) classical study of the US populists, it is worth mentioning the pioneering work of James (1988) on Peronism, Knight (1994) on Mexico and Conniff (1999) on Latin America. In comparative politics, Guillermo O'Donnell wrote a highly provocative piece in 1984 ('"And Why Should I Give a Shit?" Notes on Sociability and Politics in Argentina and Brazil', 1999) which, while dealing with authoritarianism, introduced from a comparative angle the socio-cultural effects of populism in Argentina. Both O'Donnell and James grasped the centrality of 'class insolence' in Peronism, a flaunting of the low that formed a key component of its populist grammar. In sociology, De la Torre (1997, 2000) developed in his early writings a cogent socio-cultural approach to populism, focusing on Ecuador before the advent of Correa (with titles such as 'Bucaram: Leader of the Poor or Repugnant Other?'). Flavia Freidenberg (2007) centred on socio-cultural features of populism in her reconstruction of 15 Latin American experiences of populism over 70 years.

In the decades following the pioneering work of the 1990s and 2000s, scholarship on populism from a socio-cultural angle has become truly global, ranging from South Africa to Australia, Turkey to Argentina, the Philippines to the US (Ostiguy et al. 2021). Where the ideational approach has at times been accused of overgeneralizing from the cases of radical right populism in the European centre, it is noticeable that the socio-cultural approach caught on first in analyses of populism in countries of the global semi-periphery, including Southern Europe and Turkey (see Makarychev and Crothers 2020).

Against a misunderstanding of performativity as theatricality and showmanship, Baykan (2021), for instance, has emphasized the tight, reciprocal relationship between performative praxis and social cleavages in Turkish populism (see also Riveros and Selamé 2020, for a cleavage-centred perspective). In his work on political conflicts in Turkey, Baykan has, first,

reinterpreted what seems to many to be either a secular versus religious socio-political cleavage, or a left–right spectrum, into what is fundamentally a high–low polarization, with a class cultural dimension. Second, Baykan has emphasized the presence in Turkey of an explicitly *anti-populist* pole, on the high, both socio-culturally and politically (see also Markou 2020; Moffitt 2018; Ostiguy 2009; Stavrakakis et al. 2018). Baykan’s (2018) book on Turkish politics centres on party organization and personalism, building bridges between the socio-cultural approach and other streams of political science research. Arslantaş and Arslantaş (2022), on Turkey and Greece, operationalize populism as a political style, but critically engage with Moffitt’s work by arguing that the ideological core of populist parties actually does play an important role in the periphery of Europe in the performance of crises.

Further east, in Asia, the loud populism of Rodrigo Duterte has attracted the attention of socio-culturally oriented scholars. An outstanding piece in that regard is Montiel et al. (2021). Here, the authors write that ‘swearing in public discourse [is] a contentious rhetorical feature of populist leaders’ transgressive politics’, and that it ‘generatively accomplishes... functions which contribute to the fortification of populist regimes’ (1), affirming vernacular identities with hostile humour (see also Svatoňová 2023). In some of their writings on India, Jaffrelot and Tillin (2017) have some features of a socio-cultural interpretation of populism; Resnick (2017) has championed a similar, explicitly eclectic approach to studying African populism.

While populism has been mostly oppositional in Europe, in Latin America accumulated decades of populist experience in government have introduced the study of populist institutionality as an important theme in the socio-cultural approach. The personalist versus procedural dimension of the high–low divide is at the forefront of populists’ political behaviour in governing positions. To account for populist praxis in office, Ostiguy developed during the early 2010s the notion of ‘dirty institutionality’ (2014), as an extension of Latin American plebeian praxis. The scholar who has perhaps run the furthest with this concept is Mazzolini (2022). Drawing on Laclauian and Gramscian thought, his analysis of Ecuador incorporates the concept of dirty institutionality as the ‘plebeian, improper forms, typically cashed out in terms of “the low” of politics’ (7). His diagnosis for Correa’s project is that his institutions were not ‘dirty’ enough, in the sense of being plebeian and estranged from legal rationalism, yet too ‘dirty’ in the sense of lacking regularity (12). Casullo (2019) developed the notions of ‘script’ and ‘myth’ to understand how and why populism ‘works’ and, like Diehl, has contributed highly interesting work (Casullo 2021; Casullo and Colalongo 2022) on the body and representation in populism.

Unsurprisingly, there has also been a surge of socio-cultural scholarship on Trump’s populism in the US. We highlight just a few studies here. Venizelos (2022) provides the most systematic and methodologically thorough application (see also Lorenzetti and Mattei 2022). Earlier, Ostiguy and Roberts (2016) analysed Trump’s ‘low’ performances in comparative, spatial perspective, drawing specifically on the Latin American experience. Lowndes (2017) masterfully drew on the socio-cultural approach in his analysis of American populism. Also placing Trump in the wider context of US populism, the work of Voelz (2018, 2022) in the humanities contributed to a very significant interdisciplinary advance, fostering what he calls an ‘aesthetic’ approach to populism that develops ‘with the help of Bourdieu and Elias, a sociologically grounded analysis of the aesthetics of populism’ (2022: 242).

Returning to Europe, political scientists Caiani and Padoan (2020) directed a special issue on ‘The Cultural Side of Populism’, which, explicitly based on the socio-cultural approach, explored the relationship between populism and cultural expressions in Europe. Dunkel and

Schiller (2022) and Caiani and Padoan (2023) then developed a large-scale application of the approach in their interrelated but distinct interdisciplinary projects on populism and popular music in Europe. Dunkel and Schiller's collective project addressed the creation of identities, including political ones, highlighting performative praxis, affective potentials, the construction of 'the people', and the articulation of counterhegemonic discourses (Dunkel and Schiller 2022). Insightful contributions looked at phenomena ranging from government-commissioned songs in Hungary under Orbán (Barna and Patakfalvi-Czirjak 2022) to Greek rap music and populist performances (Savvopoulos and Stavrakakis 2022). Caiani and Padoan (2023) have empirically analysed the moving relationship between populist appeals and music (including videos) in Italy, and the Lega and Five Star Movement's contrasting uses of popular music for their respective populist projects.

TOWARD A CULTURAL CLASS ANALYSIS OF POPULISM

We believe that an important next step for socio-cultural studies of populism is to draw out systematically how social inequalities of class, status and political power make populist appeals resonate (see also Westheuser 2020). This thread has remained surprisingly underdeveloped despite vivid debates about 'white working-class' populism and the support of blue-collar workers, non-college graduates or the urban poor for figures like Trump, Duterte or Orbán.⁴ By speaking to and of the 'people' and almost invariably assembling heterogeneous class coalitions, populism eschews the logic of class politics proper. Still, socio-cultural approaches attuned to the cultural markers of class and inequality can bring out the 'classed politics' (Jarness et al. 2019) of populist appeals. Specifically, it would seem fruitful to theorize and study empirically how populist appeals to the socio-cultural and politico-cultural 'low' translate social experiences of devaluation and exclusion into political identities.

With Bourdieu, such a research agenda could overcome the opposition between populism's cultural symbolism and the material economic or political grievances giving rise to populism (Berman 2021), and instead integrate the study of populism into an analysis of the *cultural mediation of unequal social relations*, or cultural class analysis (Savage 2012). The question then becomes how a divide mobilized by populists between the 'high' and the 'low' acts as a cultural 'class' divide.⁵

As a starting point, the populist style can be approached from the vantage point of cultural class analysis in two ways: (1) as a defiant revaluation of ordinary habitus forms in the face of *devaluation* (experienced both as symbolic violence from above and contamination from below); and (2) as a reflection of classed dynamics of crisis in citizens' *relations to politics*. In both regards, populism studies can draw on existing neo-Bourdiesian perspectives in political sociology. Such perspectives quite radically depart from conventional political science in approaching politics not only as a struggle between competing ideologies, but also at the level of a prior struggle over the socially attributed entitlements and competences allowing one to act as a political actor in the first place. As Mike Savage (2012: 300) elucidates, Bourdieu notes:

that those who are in lower-class positions are more likely to offer 'don't know' responses in opinion polls, and are more likely to be politically disengaged... sees the extent to which people feel politically entitled as fundamental to the political field. 'The right to speak' is even more significant than whether one speaks from a feminist, conservative, socialist, liberal, or any other perspective. And,

in many democratic nations, Bourdieu notes, large numbers of people do not think they do have the right to speak. Their lack of capital and their marginalized position in social space have made them internalize their own lack of right to a view. It is this that speaks to the true power of class... [And] it is this analysis of how the unequal distribution of cultures of entitlement, shame and respect are implicated in the political agenda that lie at the centre of the cultural class analysis paradigm.

In the reading suggested here, populism can be understood as tapping precisely into this inequality of ‘entitlement, shame and respect’, the political style of ‘flaunting the low’ being a crucial way in which it does so. What populists transgress in their low appeals, then, are latent boundaries and hierarchies implicit in the social principles guiding the political division of labour, revaluating classed habitus forms which ‘normal’ or ‘official politics’ shuts out from the realm of the acceptable (see also Aibar 2007).

The common divide socio-cultural studies of populism identify as standing at the heart of populist appeals is that between *immediacy* and *embodiment* on the one hand and *mediation* and *sublimation* on the other. Both are forms of being and presenting oneself in the political arena (or of being ‘out of place’). But they also describe a more general polarity linked to what with Bourdieu we might call *habitus*, i.e. the embodied dispositions and ways of looking at the world, which we acquire by being socialized into class relations. In many contexts, dominant social groups associate their superiority to the mastery over and sublimation of bodily impulses, and their translation into institutional gestures and displays (Elias 1994). Anti-populism, on the other hand, has been shown to be linked with habitus forms of professionalism and distance (Diehl 2017).

By staging a specific form of devalued habitus in the political arena – that of groups who, despite their non-elite status, feel entitled to lay claim to a majoritarian, deserving status as the authentic heart of the nation – populist actors seek to project themselves as representatives of a ‘low’ excluded from a political sphere hegemonized by the ‘high’. Against the controlled face work of institutional civility and manners, it sets a sense of emotional immediacy and righteous indignation, a greater presence of the body in political performance and an informal type of relating to the audience that acts as a symbol for a *social* relation between the political sphere and the citizenry. As Ostiguy et al. (2021: 6) observe, ‘the informal stands in many ways as substantive content for both proximity and antagonism to a certain kind of establishment’.

Populist aesthetics are thus deeply entangled in a symbolic class politics, although on a level that is distinct from both organized class interests and overt appeals to class (in the sense of e.g. addressing ‘the workers’). Populism can be understood as a form of *symbolic group appeals to dominated class segments not mobilized as a class in the political sense* (Bourdieu 1987). These types of appeals unfold against the backdrop of what Dörre (2019) calls ‘demobilized class societies’, that is, societies whose social hierarchies continue to be structured by class but whose political codes have ceased to draw on class as a political group signifier (see also Westheuser and della Porta 2022). What the resonance of habitus performances does is to root appeals ‘in the essentialist categories of commonsense experience and practical moralism’ (Hall 2017: 203). By closely observing the social context of the populist repertoire, we might thus be able to reconstruct a populist class politics hidden in plain sight.

In a very similar logic, Voelz’s (2022: 242) study of US populism seeks ‘to make legible the structures of inequality that ground and pervade the populist aesthetic’. Voelz’s goal complements those of Westheuser (2020) of examining the relation between the populist repertoire and the class structure. Voelz writes: ‘Bourdieu converts the materialist idea of capital into a theory of recognition... [where] actors strive for... gain in relative status’. Here, ‘embodied

and affective dispositions as well as aesthetic tastes allow for the [political] pursuit of polarized and polarizing distinction' (Voelz 2022: 243). Voelz argues that, 'in "flaunting the low", populism makes an effort to "own" depreciation [and] the depreciated become a resource for revaluation' (Voelz 2022: 247f.).

CONCLUSIONS: A NEW RESEARCH AGENDA

Adding to this thread, we suggest that an important next step for research in the socio-cultural tradition should be to complement interpretative cultural class analyses by a mapping of the *social structure of identification with high/low appeals*, with the help of survey methods. Such an analysis would require conceptual disentangling and the development of empirical indicators and appropriate questions; it would also entail a shift from the – still dominant – *supply-side* focus on leaders' discourses to the *demand side* of populist appeals. Rather than the top-down use of certain tropes, we would here look for the social structure of receptiveness for such tropes. Such a research agenda could look at two questions which are answerable through empirical studies: does the high–low polarity have a stable socio-structural anchoring? And does it constitute a political form through which *other* cleavages are expressed or is it an independent dimension of political disagreement?

In the most extreme case, populist performances would appear as merely the 'visible face' of deeper socio-political cleavages, as Ostiguy and Moffitt (2021: 63) contend. A recent study which maps populist attitudes in the two-dimensional space of US political attitudes (Santucci and Dyck 2022) can be read to point in such a direction. Here the authors find populism to align with a second dimension of racial resentment (albeit without connecting attitudes to structural factors). With a similar methodology, populism in European politics could be found to form one expression of what has been described as a newly emerging cleavage between universalism and particularism (or cosmopolitanism and communitarianism) (Bornschier et al. 2021). Understanding the link between high/low appeals and cleavage politics would be a major step forward for realignment research.

But it would be equally thinkable that the divide between high and low politics forms a divide in its own right, distinct from that of other known lines of division such as those over redistribution and migration/authoritarianism. Supporting such a reading, Westheuser's (2021) work on Germany shows populism and anti-populism to be anchored in distinct social bases. While populism is particularly strong among the politically excluded working and lower classes, anti-populism is most pronounced among educated white-collar employees, independently of their other socio-political positions. More in-depth and/or comparative work sensitive to socio-cultural dynamics could deepen these insights. Such research could help elucidate the links between the political reasoning of members of the working class and populist appeals to the 'low', as well as the elective affinities between education and anti-populism on the level of class culture and habitus forms. In either case, a deepened exchange between research on populism and the political sociology of class, status and inequality promises to be highly fruitful. The dynamic of the high/low polarity presents itself as an important and under-researched mechanism mediating between socio-structural positions and political identities in the political landscapes of demobilized class societies. In exploring populist appeals and their social embeddedness, future research can draw on a rich conceptual tradition and a rapidly

growing field of studies that apply socio-cultural approaches to populist phenomena the world over.

NOTES

1. While all populisms involve some kinds of transgression, not all transgressions are populist: populism is a transgression on the ‘low’.
2. For a synthetic overview of the field and the position of discursive and socio-cultural approaches in it, see Brubaker (2017). A promising new synthesis has also been developed by Ballacci and Goodman (2023).
3. Ostiguy et al. (2021) develop a post-Laclauian junction between the socio-cultural and discursive approaches, centring on the issue and mechanisms of identification.
4. But see Kalb’s interpretation of working-class support for radical right populism in Europe as a ‘traumatic expression of material and cultural experiences of dispossession and disenfranchisement in the neoliberal epoch’ (Kalb 2011: 1).
5. To be sure, Ostiguy’s doctoral dissertation was subtitled ‘*Class-Cultural Cleavages and Political Identity in Argentina*’ (1999), the emphasis added highlighting a key angle partly lost along the way.

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PART IV

DISCIPLINARY ANGLES

16. Political economy

Simon Tunderman

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between populism and the capitalist economy is crucial but often hard to grasp. It is well known that there are a number of different ways to conceptualize populism, but a commonality shared by most approaches is the intuition that some form of unresponsiveness on the part of the elite leads to popular frustration and, eventually, to populist mobilizations. Whether the elite is cast as morally ‘corrupt’ (Mudde 2004) or politically unwilling to meet demands put forward by the people (Laclau 2005), populism emerges as a response to the broken promises of liberal democracy (i.e. that representatives promote the interests of the represented). Against this backdrop, it is crucial to consider that liberal democracies are embedded in capitalist economies that combine a tendency for increasing socio-economic inequality with a seemingly unstoppable drive for continued economic growth. In other words, while capitalist dynamics provoke demands for government intervention to mitigate inequality, they also limit the leeway of governments to intervene effectively. As such, an important task for populism studies is to investigate how the dynamics of capitalism interact with popular dissatisfaction. This chapter will discuss this question from two angles. The first angle considers how a political economy perspective can shed light on how the workings of the capitalist economy may provide the conditions or reasons for populism to emerge in the first place. This question can be hypothesized as a matter of independent and dependent variables, with the economy as a ‘causal factor’ explaining populism. Or, alternatively, it can be conceptualized in more contingent and political terms as the strategic responses of populists to economic crisis dynamics. Next, the second angle investigates so-called ‘economic populism’, as the specific economic policy preferences and actions of populists in power.

The chapter consists of three main sections. The first section discusses the political science debate which is based on the idea that rising socio-economic inequality will impact voting behaviour, and hence tries to explain the emergence of populist parties in terms of shifting political-economic developments. This debate, of which the so-called ‘losers of globalization’ thesis is a primary example, is at its strongest when it manages to pinpoint a direct correlation between populist voting behaviour and negative economic consequences (Kriesi et al. 2008). At the same time, it will become clear that this approach comes with its drawbacks, insofar as it faces significant exceptions to its explanatory promise, while also depoliticizing the politics of populism by reducing them to economic and technological developments. The second section will then consider the impact of contemporary capitalism on populism from a more political angle. The various contributions to this debate also consider the emergence of populism against the backdrop of economic globalization and crisis dynamics, but focus in more detail on the political struggles between the establishment and populist challengers. While this helps to shed light on the actual politics of populism, this strand of the debate still struggles to grasp the economic and class dimensions of populism as such. The third section will explore

‘economic populism’, as the different political strategies and policy initiatives undertaken by populists in their efforts to promote the wellbeing of the people they claim to represent.

GLOBALIZATION, ‘LOSERS’ AND POPULISM

It is quite intuitive to assume that worsening economic conditions may have an effect on people’s attitudes towards the current social and political situation. The so-called ‘losers of globalization’ thesis developed by, among others, Hanspeter Kriesi has become well known for attempting to capture this intuition in quantitative terms. As the argument goes, with the onset of economic globalization, the outsourcing of jobs and the emergence of transnational commodity chains have fundamentally renegotiated the economic outlook for states and people alike. This process of economic globalization creates ‘winners’ and ‘losers’. In trying to account for the rise of populist parties in Western Europe from the 1990s onwards, Kriesi and his colleagues argue that it is precisely the losers of globalization – typically low-skilled workers – who tend to support populists, which then accounts for the rise of new protest parties that claim to voice ordinary people’s opposition against the political establishment (Kriesi et al. 2008: 4). In fact, the claim is that a cleavage between the winners and losers of globalization assumes centre stage in politics and increasingly replaces the more traditional left–right distinction as the central political axis of contestation (Noury and Roland 2020: 426). In the context of the European economic and financial crisis (2008 onwards), the same line of thinking leads to the claim that the ‘losers’ of globalization are predominantly attracted to right-wing populist parties, while the ‘winners’ vote for left-leaning or mainstream parties (Hernández and Kriesi 2016: 208). As such, the losers of globalization thesis aims to account for populism, specifically its right-wing manifestations, by tracing it back to deteriorating economic circumstances of particular social groups.

This ‘losers of globalization’ approach is often contrasted to the so-called ‘cultural backlash’ thesis. Norris and Inglehart argue that it is rather progressive value change brought forth by modernization processes that accounts for the rise of authoritarian populism. As such, predominantly cultural factors explain the emergence of populism, but the economy still plays an important role. An economic crisis, for example, can function as a catalyst that triggers a more direct backlash against progressive values (Norris and Inglehart 2019: 455). In that sense, the distinction between the economic dimensions of globalization and changing cultural values as explanations of the rise of populism is arguably not as clear cut as it may seem at first. This is also illustrated by the claim that economic anxiety may be expressed in cultural terms (cf. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018: 1674).

While both have assumed an important role in the current populism debate, the ‘cultural backlash’ and ‘losers of globalization’ theses are not without their problems. Critiques take different forms. From a critical perspective internal to the methodological set-up of both approaches, it turns out that their empirical results do not necessarily add up to a convincing account of the emergence of populism. The ‘losers of globalization’ thesis has been criticized because it fails to account for the fact that right-wing populist parties often do very well in regions enjoying economic prosperity, meaning that the condition of economic deterioration does not hold (Rovira Kaltwasser 2012: 188). As for the cultural backlash thesis, in trying to replicate the results, Armin Schäfer found little empirical evidence for the claim that older generations account for the rise of authoritarian populism (Schäfer 2022).

Another important point of critique is that these attempts to pinpoint the connection between populism and the economy, somewhat paradoxically, allow for relatively little space for politics in trying to explain the rise of populism. The theoretical assumptions about modernization underlying both approaches discussed here may have an essentially depoliticizing effect on the study of populism. Modernization theory's teleological thrust leaves little room for political agency and contingency (Marchart 2007: 27). And Ernesto Laclau has argued that attempts to locate the source of populism in the modernization transition of a particular segment of the population fail to see that populism is a political logic that involves contingent political strategy rather than economic/cultural determination (Laclau 1977: 156). This shifts the attention to the question as to how populists construct narratives about the state's failure to guarantee the population's wellbeing, and how they blame this either on, for example, an economic elite or, alternatively, on immigrants. Indeed, there is little evidence for the oft-heard claim voiced by right-wing populists that immigrants drive local workers out of competition (Cattaneo et al. 2015: 687). But the supposed truth of such claims is not really the issue for understanding populism, as discursive constructions of economic fear and scapegoating may be very effective even without a base in truth. Most importantly, however, the modernization-theoretical approach, insofar as it frames populism in terms of authoritarian 'losers' failing to keep up with the times, makes it very difficult to consider whether there may also be a legitimate concern in populist critiques of economic conditions, for example when it comes to the potentially disastrous consequences of austerity. Indeed, the central issue becomes to shield liberal democracy from the 'losers', which makes it difficult to allow for the possibility that liberal democratic governments may sometimes deserve criticism for their way of handling the economy.

The challenge, then, is to make room for the quintessentially political character of populism, without losing sight of the dislocatory effects of capitalism on the emergence of popular discontent with the *status quo*. An important first step towards this direction is to try to distinguish the conditions that lead to left- or right-wing populism. Dani Rodrik also adopts a perspective that connects populism to the economics of globalization, but offers an explanation as to why left-wing populism is more present in Latin America whereas Europe has seen more right-wing populists (Rodrik 2018b). While the effects of globalization are multi-faceted, in Latin America they become most directly visible in economic terms, for example as foreign direct investment or International Monetary Fund involvement. By contrast, Rodrik argues that while economic processes are certainly also important in Europe, here the effects of globalization manifest themselves most clearly as the fear of immigration (Rodrik 2018b: 25). Hence the difference between the two continents.

Arguably, something similar can be observed for different parts of Europe. Northern European countries, such as the Netherlands and Germany, have not experienced as much economic turmoil as Southern European countries. As a consequence, Southern Europe sees more left-wing populism that constructs an antagonistic opposition against economic and financial elites, whereas Northern Europe is more susceptible to xenophobic populists that aim to exclude ethnic minorities (Ibsen 2019). Clearly, the recent rise of VOX in Spain and Lega in Italy poses a challenge to this explanatory model. This more nuanced picture of right-wing populism in Southern Europe should be understood against the backdrop of the 2015–2016 refugee crisis, which placed a large claim on public resources (Manow 2021: 10). While this nuancing integrates the apparent exception into the overall framework, it also shows the difficulties that come along with attempts to explain populism in terms of larger political trends. The explanatory power of such approaches remains vulnerable to newly emerging exceptions

to its broad categorizations, such as the geographical division between Northern and Southern Europe or different segments of the population deriving from income. These broader analytical categorizations are helpful to highlight general tendencies but require a more detailed view on political strategy to grasp the complexities of the changing face of populist manifestations.

ECONOMIC CRISIS AND POPULIST POLITICS

If economic processes do not automatically produce populism, the question arising is how to account for the potentially destabilizing effects of capitalism on social and political communities. The literature is awash with tentative indications that there may be a contingent connection between popular dissatisfaction and the economy. Margaret Canovan, for example, writes that a democratically unresponsive economy may undermine the promise of popular sovereignty, prompting a populist attempt to restore it (Canovan 1999: 12). And for Laclau, political strategies to construct a new popular subject presuppose ‘some degree of crisis in the old structure’ (Laclau 2005: 177). It is not quite clear, however, how to substantiate this intuition in coherent interpretive terms. Perhaps Antonio Gramsci captures the gist accurately when he writes that it ‘may be ruled out that immediate economic crises of themselves produce fundamental historical events; they can simply create a terrain more favourable to the dissemination of certain modes of thought, and certain ways of posing and resolving questions involving the entire subsequent development of national life’ (Gramsci 1971: 184). Economic crisis and downturns, then, can be a favourable terrain for populists to respond to people’s frustrations by constructing new popular subjects. It is very much a question of contingent politics whether this subject will be right-wing authoritarian or will rather involve a left-wing project to reclaim democracy and meet people’s demands for socio-economic wellbeing. These contingent dynamics were visible in Europe during the recent financial and economic crisis.

While the crisis affected all European countries, some, such as Greece and Spain, were hit harder than others. Both countries saw the emergence of grassroots protest movements which later provided the basis for populist parties. The Greek case demonstrates the close link between the economic crisis and populism clearly. In his study of the protests against the austerity regime imposed on Greece by the so-called Troika, Savvas Voutyras notes the ‘charged references to loss of livelihood and economic security, unemployment and loss of dignity’ (Voutyras 2016: 224). In this way, the Greek protests amounted to a rejection of establishment party politics, which represented the existing economic and political system (Prentoulis and Thomassen 2013: 172). Indeed, the protest movements fed into populist resistance as well as ‘sovereigntist’ attempts to reinstate popular sovereignty to improve socio-economic conditions (Katsambekis et al. 2022: 5). This underscores the crucial moment of political strategy and mobilization that connects economic crisis to populism.

Furthermore, the political dissatisfaction with the neoliberal economic order that started in the streets of Athens found its institutional counterpart in SYRIZA, which reinvented itself as the party around which opposition to the establishment could be articulated. SYRIZA managed to gather around itself the variety of popular demands that emerged as a consequence of the social, economic and political upheaval of the crisis. And in this process, its identity changed, so that the party moved from a marginalized position into the political limelight where it represented ‘the people’ as such (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014: 127). In a context of economic upheaval, SYRIZA symbolized the resistance of the Greek people against the aus-

terity regime (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2019). It is thus also possible to understand the emergence of SYRIZA as a response to the crisis of representation that arose when the Greek political establishment failed to produce adequate answers to the challenges of the crisis and went along with European austerity politics.

This entanglement of crisis, debt, austerity, populism and democratic accountability also became visible in Spain. Experiencing difficulties to roll over its debt, Spain found itself in heavy financial weather and, partly due to the austerity measures implemented from 2010 onwards, experienced high unemployment rates. This sparked street protests and eventually led to the emergence of Podemos, which articulated demands arising out of the dire political-economic situation into an antagonistic populist frontier against the political establishment. These demands illustrated the diverse plurality of this left-wing populist movement, insofar as they included ‘the right to employment, housing, social protection, health, education, the cancellation of unjust debt, the end of austerity policies, the restoration of popular sovereignty’ (Kioupkiolis 2016: 103). And it is crucial to note the particular demand to reinstate popular sovereignty and overcome the crisis of representation, which directly confronted the involvement of the Troika in Spanish economic policy (Eklundh 2018). This signals clearly that left-wing populism can have a democratic and emancipatory potential in a context determined by economic crisis, the power of financial markets and the growing influence of democratically unaccountable transnational institutions (Mouffe 2018: 18). Indeed, for Chantal Mouffe, left-wing populism is the most promising option to tackle the most urgent tasks at hand. These include addressing the increasing importance of financial capital, along with growing labour inequality and the rising influence of technocratic elites. Crucially, left-wing populism can also take the wind out of the sails of right-wing attempts to scapegoat minorities for economic crisis and hardship.

On the other hand, the case of Germany illustrates how shifting economic conditions can provide a favourable terrain for the emergence of right-wing populism. The uneven geographical development of the European internal market works to the advantage of Germany with its export-oriented growth strategy fuelled by depressing labour costs. As a consequence, Germany was in a better position to reservice its debt when the crisis hit Europe, and as a ‘creditor state’ assumed an influential position with regard to setting the conditions for debt assistance to other European states (Hadjimichalis 2011: 256). Still, Germany, too, has seen inequality and precarity rise over the past decades (Nachtwey 2018). In this context, Germany’s seeming immunity to the populist wave disappeared with the emergence of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which positioned itself against the European strategy to overcome the financial and economic crisis. While the AfD began as a protest party against Germany’s role as creditor to debtor states, it soon developed into a full-fledged right-wing populist party with strong anti-immigration and anti-Muslim views. The party did this by extending its populist equivalential chain to incorporate demands for more patriotism, to move away from multi-cultural society and to push back against European Union (EU) influence. Interestingly enough, while the AfD also mentions seemingly progressive positions on LGBT rights, this strategy by and large aims to exclude immigrant communities stereotypically assumed to oppose this (Kim 2017: 8). Rather than opening up the idea of the people, then, this strategy reconfirmed the AfD’s fixed idea of a ‘genuine’ German people supposedly under threat. In this way, the AfD’s rise shows how the dislocatory dynamics of capitalism, even if a full crisis is avoided, can provide a fruitful framework for right-wing xenophobic populism.

The three cases discussed above are each very different, but they all underscore that the relationship between political economy and populism is not so much one of determination through modernization processes. Rather, it involves contingent political strategy in contexts where vested socio-economic relations are challenged and undermined by shifting economic processes. In other words, the demands that arise from the capitalist economy are taken up along with other demands and integrated into populist chains of equivalence. Indeed, the eventual character of such newly emerging populist movements is very much a question of contingent politics and may take on a left-leaning or right-wing xenophobic form. Now, while Laclau's approach to populism as a political logic is accurately positioned to grasp the politics involved in turning the particularity of demands into a general chain of equivalence, it also comes along with a problem from a political-economic point of view. The problem is that just like discourse theory in general, Laclau's work on populism is notoriously silent on questions related to capitalism (Diskin and Sandler 1993; Kaplan 2012). Developed in response to Marxist approaches that tended to reduce politics to structural economic determinants, Laclau's work on antagonism, hegemony and populism frees politics from underlying deterministic tendencies. But now the question arises how to conceptualize the crucial role of economic factors in a framework based on the primacy of the political. As a consequence, there is a risk that the capitalist economy will remain outside of the analytical grasp of populist reason.

An ongoing debate sees the beginning of attempts to address this gap. Pedro Rey-Araujo argues that a Laclauian take on populism should be grounded on a comprehensive political-economic analysis, in order to conceptualize its material conditions. Crisis is important here, but the extent to which it gives rise to populism may depend on the way capital accumulation is organized. In contrast to regulated social structures of accumulation, liberal social structures of accumulation are more likely to see the emergence of populism once they enter into a situation of crisis insofar as they give rise to a large number of heterogeneous demands that remain unsatisfied (Rey-Araújo 2019). This perspective helps to connect populism to shifting economic dynamics in different contexts. But it also raises additional questions, for example, how the contingency of populism can be upheld in the face of the class-determined nature of demands arising from economic crisis. After all, the challenge is that the 'Marxist notion of "class" cannot be incorporated into an enumerative chain of identities, simply because it is supposed to be the articulating core around which all identity is constituted' (Laclau 2000: 297). Mark Devenney takes a different approach and argues that, in the face of the financialization of capitalism which revolves around assets that appropriate the future value of the social, populism starts to run into its limits as a potential counterhegemonic strategy. Rather than the populist logic of equivalence, only a radical democratic logic of equality can confront the transnational power of financialized neoliberalism (Devenney 2020). This rethinking of the potential of populism in a changing global capitalist economy is crucial for the further development of the debate, especially since financialization is one of the most important political-economic discussions at the time.

ECONOMIC POPULISM

Political economy is important not just as a potential explanation for the emergence of populism, but also as a possible field of action populists engage in. If populism in general is about the antagonistic contestation between the people and the elite, then economic populism

refers specifically to the defence of the people's economic interests relative to the elite and other potential (perceived) threats. As such, it is related to populist parties' viewpoints on the economy and their economic policymaking (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni 2020). Now, just like the concept of populism itself, there is debate and disagreement about the characterization of economic populism. But as is the case in the general debate on populism, the overall tendency seems to be to consider economic populism in predominantly negative terms (e.g. Bartha et al. 2020; Edwards 2010). It is perhaps no surprise that, within an overarching framework that considers populism a threat to democracy if not society as such, the economic dimension of populism is also often debated in terms of its costs, its risks and its disadvantages. Populists are associated with erratic and irresponsible behaviour, insofar as they 'reject restraints on the conduct of economic policy' (Rodrik 2018a: 196). And as will become clear in this section, there certainly is evidence to support this idea that populist economic policy is making strays from the usual or expected path. But the generally pejorative association of economic populism is not always justified. Especially in the context of the European economic and financial crisis, left-wing populist positions clashed with more mainstream economic policy, but that did not necessarily make them irresponsible. Rather, it was a sign of a fundamental disagreement as to how the crisis should be resolved, and what principles should govern the economy.

In an early attempt to define economic populism, Sebastian Edwards and Rüdiger Dornbusch draw on research from Latin America and come to the conclusion that the economic policies of populists 'have almost unavoidably resulted in major macroeconomic crises that have ended up hurting the poorer segments of society' (Dornbusch and Edwards 1991: 1). Populists' attempts to address income inequality led them to rely on expansive macro-economic policies and deficit spending. Economic populism, on this reading, is a risky business, even for the people whose interests it aims to promote. In a similar vein, Emre Ünal argues that populists tend to favour irrational and irresponsible wage increases, which can 'serve to benefit the government and shore up its political position, especially if there is strong competition between political parties' (Ünal 2021: 408). At the end of the day, however, this may hurt working-class interests, for example when it leads to rising inflation. There is a general tendency in the debate, then, to think about economic populism in terms of 'policies receiving support from a significant fraction of the population, but ultimately hurting the economic interests of this majority' (Acemoglu et al. 2013: 772). Hence, the general association of economic populism with irresponsible policy that has costly effects. However, the question arises: What is specifically populist about this? As Rovira Kaltwasser points out, the United States government under George W. Bush ran large budget deficits, while Evo Morales' economic policy in Bolivia could certainly be called responsible (Rovira Kaltwasser 2019: 4). Yet the latter is called populist, while the former is not. This – and other examples – would throw doubt on the characterization of economic populism as irresponsible and generally disadvantageous to the working class. Indeed, Paris Aslanidis' conceptual critique identifies tendencies of 'cherry-picking' and 'circular reasoning', raising the question whether the theory of economic populism as proposed by Edwards, Dornbusch and others is still tenable at all (Aslanidis 2022: 253).

How to approach complexities of economic populism, then? Perhaps the difficulty in distilling the specifically populist content signals, paraphrasing Laclau, that economic populism constitutes a formal logic of politics in the economic domain rather than a specific ideological orientation. In this way, economic populism emerges as the strategic incorporation of economic demands into populist equivalential chains. This is prominently visible in (right-wing)

populist demands to reinstate the political and economic sovereignty of the country in the face of global and transnational trade. For example, in 2017, the Front National (currently Rassemblement National) floated the idea of having a referendum about whether France should leave the Eurozone, while in Italy the Lega combined the aim to promote the interests of small businesses with an interest to repeal the Schengen area (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni 2020: 210). In this sense, economic populism constructs an antagonistic opposition against ‘Europe’ as having both an economic and a political angle. The political bent of economic populism is also visible in the Netherlands, where the right-wing populists of the Party for Freedom construct an eclectic mix of left- and right-wing economic policies, aiming to serve the interests of its particular understanding of ‘the people’ (Otjes 2019).

The ideologically variegated politics of economic populism can also be observed in Hungary. On the one hand, Fidesz’s economic policy was in line with expectations associated with economic populism, for example in its attempts to promote working families by lowering taxes. But on the other, after Fidesz won the 2018 elections with a two-third majority, it launched a significant reform of social policy, including pension reforms and, crucially, labour law reforms. Dubbed a ‘slave law’, partly because of the option to enforce overtime requirements, the labour reforms sparked large protests in Budapest (Scheiring and Szombati 2020: 728). This does not fit into the majoritarian orientation typically expected of economic populism and rather identifies an authoritarian trait. In turn, this finding from Hungary corresponds to a broader observation that radical right-wing populists in Western Europe combine nativism and authoritarianism into a preference for ‘welfare chauvinism and economic protectionism’ (Otjes et al. 2018: 271). At the same time, such ‘heterodox’ economic preferences, for example as observable in Hungary and Poland, will be limited in practice by wider EU regulatory frameworks (Toplišek 2020: 398). As such, structural factors may set boundaries to populists’ economic ambitions.

While this is instructive towards understanding right-wing populism and its economic preferences, left-wing populist parties display different economic strategies. In the context of the financial and economic crisis in Greece, SYRIZA emerged as a party that challenged the political consensus in Greece and Europe in general. But this was a crisis situation characterized by the partial erosion of democracy on account of the measures taken to save the Economic and Monetary Union. These measures, most prominently among which were austerity measures, were presented as without alternative, in the sense that they had to trump democratic procedures if full economic implosion was to be avoided. On top of this, economic austerity had serious consequences for large parts of the Greek population, as was visible in rapidly increasing unemployment figures (Roussos 2019). This, then, was the kind of mainstream economic policy expertise that SYRIZA resisted. Its economic populism consisted in trying to reinstate a degree of economic sovereignty against the power of financial markets and Troika institutions. Furthermore, it attempted to appeal to reason by showing that the crisis was a European and not just a Greek phenomenon, provoked by structural economic inequalities between ‘core’ and ‘peripheral’ regions. As such, SYRIZA proposed an end to austerity as well as progressive reforms of the Economic and Monetary Union (Šumonja 2019: 448). As is well known, in the end these plans did not materialize, as SYRIZA did not withstand the pressure of creditors and fell in line with the general direction of European crisis policy. But this in itself does not necessarily show the irrationality or irresponsibility of SYRIZA’s economic populism. It rather indicated a fundamental disagreement between SYRIZA and the major European players about the normative principles that should guide economic policy. In

turn, this underscores that economic populism is difficult to define *a priori*, and should rather be understood as part of different attempts at constructing ‘the people’.

CONCLUSION

The foundational insight for discussions about populism and political economy is that capitalist dynamics set in motion a logic of inequality, crisis and market domination that provides the conditions for the emergence of popular dissatisfaction with the social and political *status quo*. Attempts to trace the correlation between material loss and populist voting behaviour can provide a general indication of this, but lack the analytical subtlety to account for the specifically political dimension of populism in the context of the economy. In turn, a more ‘political’ analysis that considers how demands arising from the socially disintegrating dynamics of capitalist crisis are taken up and integrated into a populist front could potentially shed more light on the political struggles involved. But in this case there is a risk that the capitalist economy, and specifically its crucial class dynamics, will remain outside of the actual analytical framework, but still impact on it as an influential force. This necessitates a non-essentialist rethinking of the notion of class and its contingent connection with populist politics.

Finally, economic populism often invokes stereotypes of irrationality and irresponsibility, but just like populism in general, its ideological content cannot be pinned down *a priori*. Rather, insofar as economic populism emerges through the construction of populist chains incorporating economic elements, it can take a number of different orientations. Left-wing economic populism, such as SYRIZA’s in Greece, can set an ideological counterpoint to the ‘there is no alternative’ course prevalent during the financial and economic crisis in Europe. In turn, the peculiar mix of majoritarianism and workfare or even authoritarian neoliberalism exhibited by right-wing populist parties such as Fidesz in Hungary underscores the eclectic nature of economic populism. Indeed, these discussions of political economy lend further urgency to the question whether populism is the defining feature of such movements, or if they would be more accurately considered as authoritarian.

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17. International relations and foreign policy

Angelos Chrysogelos

INTRODUCTION

As scholarly and public interest in populism increased rapidly in recent years, many researchers have turned to the previously understudied question of the international dimensions of populism. Developments like the Brexit vote in the 2016 referendum in the United Kingdom (UK) and the Donald Trump victory in the United States (US) elections of the same year pointed to the roots of populism in dynamics that transcend national borders, like immigration and exposure to international trade. The rise of populist leaders across Europe, America and Asia raised the question of whether populism is a structural feature of world politics, intertwined with other systemic, political and economic, parameters of international relations (IR). And, as populists have entrenched themselves in power, it has become easier to study consistently their foreign policy preferences and actions.

As a result, the literature on the international relations of populism – whether of the ‘outside-in’ dynamic of international developments fostering populism at the national level or the ‘inside-out’ process of populist foreign policy – is one of the fastest-growing areas of the populism literature today. This chapter offers an overview of this field in two parts.

The first part, which comprises the following section, looks at the debates about the ‘outside-in’ relationship between the international system and populism, in particular what kind of international factors drive the emergence and shape of populism at the national level. At the centre of these debates is the concept of globalization, which can take different meanings and therefore highlight different factors that influence the direction of populism. The next section comprises the second part of the overview, focused on the role of populism in foreign policy, the ‘inside-out’ effect. There is a literal explosion of publications in this field in recent years (for earlier overviews see Chrysogelos 2017a; Verbeek and Zaslove 2017; for a recent review of the state of the art and discussion of future directions see Chrysogelos et al. 2023). This literature has developed in the shadow of the alleged populist threat against the liberal international order (Ikenberry 2018). The relative reprieve from this ‘state of emergency’ since the Trump defeat may help foreign policy scholars to assess more coolly the actual impact of populism. The section discusses some of these nuanced perspectives on populism’s role in foreign policy that are beginning to emerge.

Building on these observations, the third section explores the conceptual implications of the international debate of populism. IR and foreign policy analysis (FPA) scholars have overwhelmingly borrowed conceptualizations of populism from comparative politics. The question is if insights of populism from an international perspective can perform the opposite function, i.e. contribute to a more sophisticated understanding of the role of populism in comparative politics. While of course it is not possible to explore this question in full within the confines of this chapter, this section attempts a theoretical discussion of the implications of the intersection of populism with IR for populism studies. The final section summarizes and discusses ways forward.

SYSTEMIC CHANGE AND THE RISE OF POPULISM

That populism is a phenomenon affected by international conditions is not a particularly new perspective, as the international realm has been the background of many classic studies of populism. However, the international dimension has rarely been acknowledged explicitly. Rather, it is up to scholars interested today in the international framework that affects the rise of populism to decipher the international dimension in earlier works.

Thinking for example of the famous Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner volume, while informed by tenets of modernization theory, its chapters can be read through the prism of IR if modernization is understood as a structural condition impinging on late-modernizing societies, often in the shape of important systemic shifts like decolonization (Ionescu and Gellner 1969). Similarly, the emergence of agrarian populism in the US in the 1880s (Goodwyn 1978) can be read as a story of the interaction of a peripheralized group with the pressures of advancing capitalism, domestically and internationally. In a fascinating, although today largely forgotten comparative analysis, Robert Johnson (1983) teases out the analogies between this American populism of the late nineteenth century and the populism of new post-colonial states in the 1970s, both viewed as a reaction to the dislocations of the integration into a larger capitalist international economy.

The historical trajectory of Latin American populism also offers hints as to the importance of international factors. From the protectionism of early Peronism, to the neoliberal populism drawing on the predominant climate of the 1980s–1990s and the spirit of the Washington Consensus, to the counterreaction of left-wing populism during the ‘Pink Tide’ in the 2000s, the successive iterations of populism in Latin America can be seen in light of the evolution of grander structural and ideological conditions in the international system (Grigera 2017). Within this trajectory, particular attention has been paid to the end of the Cold War as a major turning point, with implications also for the character of populism in Europe (Mair 2002; Weyland 1999).

In recent years, the question of the international sources of populism has revolved around globalization, seen as the predominant systemic condition of world politics. There are analogies here with the engagement of the first generation of populism studies with modernization, similarly emanating from the developed ‘core’ of the international system and dragging peripheral societies towards seemingly inevitable, homogenizing socio-economic modernity. Globalization’s universal scope and multi-faceted nature, however (encompassing cultural as well as economic factors and including a deeper penetration of national societies by external forces), makes it a more contested concept (see Bartelson 2000). Thus, how one exactly defines globalization, or rather, which of its facets one prioritizes, is crucial for assessing the exact nature of the international-on-domestic impact today.

A big part of the scholarship that explicitly links populism to globalization understands the latter in material and economic terms, noting especially its neoliberal nature. Selim Aytaç and Ziya Öniş (2014) have discussed the concurrent rise of Erdoğan in Turkey and the Kirchners in Argentina in the aftermath of harsh International Monetary Fund (IMF) adjustment programmes and the reconstruction of domestic political economies under new hegemonic political projects. Vedi Hadiz (2016) has analysed Islamic populism across Asia and the Middle East (Indonesia, Iran and Turkey) as a reaction to the effects of neoliberal globalization, the fragmentation of state–society relations and their reconstitution by new leaders with an anti-establishment profile. A similar framework was applied to a cross-regional comparison

of global scope in a special issue of the *International Political Science Review*, edited by Hadiz and Angelos Chrysosgelos (2017), which also attempted to identify the conjuncture of international and domestic structural, institutional as well as historical factors that determine the ultimate success of populist projects.

The rapid and spectacular emergence of populism in Europe and the US in the previous decade recentred the debate about the international determinants of populism around considerations predominant in Western democracies. The two main explanations competing here are economic and cultural, namely whether populism is primarily a response to economic crisis and material dislocation, or to immigration and multi-culturalism. Each explanation obviously draws on an equivalent understanding of globalization as primarily an economic or cultural force.

As right-wing populists had been successful for quite some time in Europe, the cultural explanation has an established tradition in the literature. The authoritative analysis is that of Hanspeter Kriesi and his colleagues, who explicitly account for globalization as a systemic condition impacting on West European party systems in the shape of a new cleavage between cultural demarcation versus integration (Kriesi et al. 2008). Supporters of the former are dissatisfied with rising immigration and multi-culturalism and form the backbone of populist radical right parties. This perspective informs analyses about more recent phenomena, like Brexit in the UK and Trump in the US, as essentially extensions of this wave of populist-nativist reaction to immigration (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). These arguments inform conceptions of populism as an essentially cultural phenomenon, intrinsically connected to primordial, restrictive views of the political community (Brubaker 2020).

And yet, the rise of populism in the West has also alerted scholars to the fact that populism can be a major reaction to material and economic dislocation and inequality, long-standing features of the globalized system. Economic crisis in the West, most importantly the financial crash of 2008–2009, the subsequent recession in the US and the Eurozone crisis in Europe between 2010 and 2015 reminded what observers of populism in the Global South had long known: that populism is primarily a phenomenon with economic roots. Early on, major reactions to the effects of crisis took on a populist character, emblemized in the ‘99%’ theme of anti-Wall Street demonstrations. Subsequently, the Eurozone crisis catalysed the emergence in Europe of a significant left-wing populist wave, particularly in countries battered by European Union (EU)-imposed austerity like Greece and Spain. Left-wing populism had been weak in Europe up until that point, but the success of parties like SYRIZA in Greece and Podemos in Spain showed how systemic economic crisis can lead to strong populist reactions (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). In Southern Europe, opposition to austerity and a collapse of trust towards elites reinforced each other, with demands for economic justice and political reform and representation articulated side by side (Katsanidou and Otjes 2016).

The economy versus immigration debate has been complicated by the fact that the two factors appear to be interrelated. Both Brexit and Trump’s victory in 2016, for example, expressed cultural opposition to immigration as well as discontent with the exposure of deindustrialized ‘left-behind heartlands’ like the American Midwest and Northern England to the competitive economic forces of globalization (Gest 2016). Trump’s obsession with protectionism in particular helped turn attention to a long-standing critique of globalization as a disruptive force at the national level, particularly in the shape of exposure to trade openness (Rodrik 2017). Given this mutual reinforcement of cultural and economic factors, more recent analyses of the rise of populism have aimed to move beyond this binary and synthesize the

two explanations, arguing that economic crisis can be a trigger for nativist sentiments while concurrent cultural and material peripheralization deepens a sense of alienation from the elites (Gidron and Hall 2020).

While these works are valuable for unpacking the specific factors behind populist successes in different national settings, they do not constitute fully international explanations in the sense of identifying a specific causal and conceptual connection between developments in the international system and outcomes at the national level. Most importantly, while it is plausible that preoccupation with immigration leads to right-wing populism and economic crisis to left-wing populism, it remains largely unexplained why reactions to either kind of crisis would have to lead to populism as such, rather than the radical ideologies (e.g. fascism or radical socialism) addressing these specific policy issues directly.

To answer this question, I have attempted to account for the rise of populism as a reaction to the democratic and representative implications of globalization. Drawing on the work of scholars like Michael Zürn (see Zürn et al. 2012), who have problematized the effects of the internationalization of policymaking and the dissociation of state elites from national electorates through the proliferation of opaque transgovernmental networks of governance and expertise, I argue that populism reflects a political-representational popular discontent catalysed invariably by economic or cultural crisis. Reaction to these crises takes a populist form precisely because their resolution is seen as a question of democratic representation, with the nationally demarcated democratic community ‘taking back control’ of its borders or economic policy seen as a pre-condition for real policy change. It is in this sense that populists both on the left and right prioritize sovereignty and reclaiming powers from international elites as the foundation of their agenda to empower the people (Chryssogelos 2020). With this observation, we now approach the question of the distinct character of populist foreign policy, which is the topic of the next section.

POPULISM AND FOREIGN POLICY

Despite some early exceptions discussing the foreign policy of the European populist right (Schori Liang 2007), Global South leaders like Hugo Chávez and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (Dodson and Dorraj 2008), and even of the nineteenth-century American agrarian populists (Amstutz 2014), the study of the foreign policy of populism was for long an underdeveloped field. This changed with the rise of populists to power in a range of European countries – Hungary, Turkey, Poland, Greece, Italy – the increased participation of populist parties in coalition governments with non-populists – Netherlands, Finland, Spain – and the victory of Trump in 2016. This created many opportunities for foreign policy scholars to compare populists’ stances and actions in various external policy areas and identify common threads of a populist foreign policy type.

The rapidly growing literature on populism and foreign policy can be loosely divided into two camps. Works in a more mainstream direction seek to uncover a distinctive impact of populism on applied policies or policymaking processes, embarking primarily from the perspective of populism as a thin-centred ideology (Hawkins et al. 2018). Works in a more critical tradition embark from a view of foreign policy as a field where state power is reproduced and its legitimacy and linkages with its domestic society contested and updated. In this tradition,

the distinctive effect of populism is less in new policies than in a way foreign policy is articulated that is different to that of non-populists.

Starting with works in the mainstream tradition, populism has been associated with a focus on sovereignty, an antagonistic relationship with liberal international institutions, anti-Americanism (as the US is seen as the 'elite' of the international system), a belligerent foreign policy stance and protectionism. Populism is generally understood as an inward-looking disposition towards international affairs, complicating cooperation and the functioning of international institutions. In Europe especially, populism has been associated with Euroscepticism and affinity for Vladimir Putin's Russia (see generally Balfour 2016; Chrysosgelos 2017a; Mead 2011).

However, a closer look at populist positions and actions reveals that a direct and consistent policy effect on foreign policy is far from self-evident. First, as foreign policy scholars admit, the ideological make-up of populist parties and their views on foreign policy is substantially determined by the 'thicker' ideologies of the left and right that populism coexists with (Verbeek and Zaslove 2017). Based on this, we can predict, for example, whether populism will target as 'international elites' global economic actors and institutions promoting neo-liberalism and deepening inequality, or those institutions and processes that they consider responsible for an increase of immigration and a threat to the cultural sovereignty of the nation. While this is true, it raises a secondary problem, namely what is the practical policy impact of populism. Do left-wing populists, for example, oppose the IMF and US-driven neoliberal globalization on the basis of their populism (opposition to international elites) or their 'radical' socialism? If thick ideologies do most of the foreign policy content 'heavy lifting', what does populism explain?

A second challenge to the straightforward ideological policy perspective of populism in foreign policy concerns the consistency and stability of populist positions both over time and across states and regions. A good example here is protectionism. While suspicion towards free trade has indeed been the hallmark of many prominent populist movements and leaders, including Perón, Trump, post-colonial African leaders and radicals of the right and left in countries like France since the end of the Cold War, there have been many other populists who have supported free trade, from the US agrarians of the 1890s to neoliberal populists today like Silvio Berlusconi, Nigel Farage and populist leaders outside Europe like Recep Tayip Erdogan, Thaksin Shinawatra and Narendra Modi. Similarly, an alleged affinity towards Russia characterizes only some populists. The Law and Justice (PiS) party in Poland, for example, is strongly anti-Russian, as are some far-right populists in Scandinavia like the Danish People's Party and the Sweden Democrats. Put simply, policy heterogeneity is vast in the foreign policy preferences of populists, influenced by their ideological legacies as well as by the geopolitical context and the strategic cultures of their countries (Chrysosgelos 2021a).

Third, the supposed inwardness of populists, their focus on sovereignty and suspicion towards international cooperation also need to be qualified. On the one hand, there have been prominent cases where the 'people' for whom populists speak in international affairs is actually a transnational entity, encompassing entire regions or cultural identities spanning entire continents (De Cleen 2017; see also Panayotu, this volume). Whether it is Muslim populists speaking for the global Muslim *umma* (Hadiz 2016), progressive populists like Chávez and Evo Morales speaking both for the entire Latin America and for all the world's poor (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2011) or European nativist populists currently adopting a culturalist European identity mobilized against threatening aliens and cultures like radical Islam

(McDonnell and Werner 2019), populism need not be associated necessarily with a limited conception of national sovereignty. Recent examples of political movements aiming explicitly to speak for the ‘people’ in transnational terms further demonstrate populism’s conceptual autonomy from the limits of national borders (De Cleen et al. 2020).

On the other hand, populists’ reticence towards international institutions and global governance processes is also a question of context. This view is overtly West-centric, informed by our perspective of European and North American populists who, whether from the right or the left, indeed appear exceedingly focused on national sovereignty and mistrust regional and international institutions like the EU, IMF, World Trade Organization or NATO. But it is a different story in the Global South, where many populists are, if anything, willing to engage with international negotiation processes, summitry and institutions in order to promote their image and status. India’s Modi is a typical example of this (Plagemann and Destradi 2019). While Global South populists oppose some international institutions, as Latin American left-wing populists did against the IMF, they are less opposed in principle to *all parts* of the international institutional architecture. Rather, a general opposition to the liberal international order is concentrated on populists in the West, and in most cases a specific ideological sub-set of them: the populist radical right (Chrysogelos 2017a, 2021a).

One final question about the distinctiveness of populism emerges when one considers its effects in terms of foreign policy change. Here as well, the verdict is mixed. Some populists have indeed brought about departures from previous policies, with Brexit in the UK and Trump’s tariffs in the US a case in point. But in most other countries and in most other policy areas, it is difficult to see populists significantly reorienting their countries’ foreign policy or doing things substantially different from their non-populist predecessors. In an analysis of the foreign policy of the populist SYRIZA-ANEL government in Greece between 2015 and 2019, for example, I found that any changes affected more the tone, style and argumentation than the substance of Greek foreign policy. Even these policies that appeared substantially new, such as Tsipras’ flirtations with China, were a continuation of policies first devised by non-populist governments (Chrysogelos 2021b).

If the policy impact of populism appears less distinctive and not particularly strong, its impact on processes of policymaking is much stronger and unambiguous. Of course, populists generally have little influence over the foreign policy decisions of governments where they are minor partners. However, where populists dominate government formation in single-party or coalition governments, the procedural effect is much stronger. Depending on the institutional depth and historical traditions of the state, populists may indeed manage to politicize and undermine the standing of independent foreign policy bureaucracies and experts like professional diplomats (Lequesne 2021). Populists have also been found to drive the trend (which admittedly was present in foreign policymaking before their rise to prominence) towards personalization of foreign policy, as populist leaders prefer to concentrate power and use foreign policy as an opportunity to reach out to their domestic and global audience, particularly through the use of new social media (Destradi and Plagemann 2019).

As the distinct effect of populism on foreign policy is difficult to establish unambiguously, many foreign policy scholars turn to critical perspectives to identify populism’s distinctiveness in foreign policy. These works build on post-structural and discursive approaches in FPA that emphasize foreign policy’s character as a field of contestation of national identities, articulation of new legitimating discourses of political power and reproduction of the state’s incorporation of its domestic society. Following this, populism’s effect lies less in specific preferences, poli-

cies and actions – the ‘*what*’ of foreign policy – than on the unique way foreign policy is used to present the relationship between power and the people in antagonistic terms and to redraw the limits of the legitimate political community – the ‘*how*’ of foreign policy.

Thus, Erin Jenne (2021) has understood populism as well as nationalism as sovereign imageries that use foreign policy to draw the limits of the political community and project their preferred relationship (antagonistic or deferential) between it and official power. Similarly, Thorsten Wojczewski (2020) has found the securitization (the presentation of different foreign actors as security threats) in India’s foreign policy under Modi as a way to identify and target the enemies of the ‘people’ domestically. Daniel Wajner (2021) sees in foreign policy, and especially the effort to construct alternative and ideologically charged structures of regional cooperation, a method used by Latin American populists to increase the legitimacy of their regimes once they enter power. Finally, David Cadier makes use of the IR concept of practice (Adler and Pouliot 2011) to argue that populist foreign policy can be understood as a set of practices, used to embody the identification of the ‘people’ with its genuine representatives who finally took power from previous unresponsive elites. He uses the example of PiS in Poland and its foreign policy rhetoric towards Russia, Germany, Ukraine and the EU to demonstrate this (Cadier 2021; Cadier and Szulecki 2020).

Trump’s trade policy is of particular interest here, given that trade is a straightforward policy area relying on clear-cut material cost-benefit analyses both of specific economic interests and of politicians seeking to represent them and gain their vote. From this perspective, Trump’s erratic ‘trade wars’ never seemed to make much sense from a conventional political economic viewpoint, indeed even from the viewpoint of his own political interest, given that retaliatory tariffs by other nations were designed to hurt crucial constituencies for his re-election. And yet, Trump persevered with his protectionism. Can this be explained on the basis of his populism?

The answer may lie in the fact that tariffs for Trump served less to help specific economic interests and more to support his image as an anti-establishment figure who challenged the free trade orthodoxy of the ‘elites’. Trade underpinned Trump’s conception of the ‘people’ as threatened by culturally alien forces – in this sense, his trade discourse performed much the same role as his immigration discourse, with the ‘cheating’ Chinese in an analogous role as the ‘criminal’ Mexicans. Tariffs also had a performative aspect, in that they showcased how Trump finally heard the voices of the ‘left-behind’ post-industrial heartlands of the Midwest, further bolstering his populist credentials (Lamp 2018). These domestic effects of his trade policy were amplified by his followers online (Boucher and Thies 2019). By turning conventional trade policy considerations on their head, Trump is the best example of how populism’s distinctiveness lies not so much in the policies pursued, as in the unique way outsiders and external foes are used to underpin the people/elite antagonism at home and strengthen the hold of populist leaders over their supporters.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND THE STUDY OF POPULISM

What does the international study of populism imply for populism studies more broadly? Thinking about populism as a phenomenon of IR and a factor of foreign policy reveals some less appreciated dimensions of the phenomenon that, perhaps, can contribute to the debates on this topic in comparative politics and political theory. Due to space constraints, only a very

cursory and inevitably incomplete picture can be painted here, serving more as a suggestion for further thinking and research rather than an unambiguous answer to the questions raised.

A first observation is that the mainstream perspective of populism as a thin-centred ideology, based on the so-called ideational approach (Hawkins et al. 2018; Mudde 2004), is not as well suited to appreciate populism's distinctiveness in world politics. First, this perspective relies on populism's coexistence with 'thicker' and elaborate ideologies to explain the specific content and policy preferences of populists. This is of course appropriate for Western democracies, and even works in settings in the Global South where populism coexists with political-religious ideologies (political Islam, Hindu nationalism) or regional identities (Latin American *americanismo*). But other populist phenomena are much too amorphous or heterogeneous, not only in the Global South (such as, for example, Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand or Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines) but even in Europe (e.g. the Five Star Movement in Italy or the Yellow Vests movement in France). An understanding of populism as a global phenomenon with multiple regional iterations probably requires a different conceptualization.

Even more importantly, the mainstream understanding of populism as a thin-centred ideology implies that populism can be associated with specific policy preferences and stances that can be consistent across cases, time and policy areas. But the nature of foreign policy as an area affected by multiple domestic and international factors inevitably creates inconsistencies. Many populists are indeed protectionist, but enough of them are (or have been) supporters of free trade to make this an imperfect criterion of populist foreign policy. Many are mistrustful of international institutions and multi-lateral negotiations, but most populist leaders end up participating in them anyway. Almost all populists emphasize sovereignty of the 'people' from international 'elites', but this does not necessarily cue isolationism and withdrawal from international affairs – indeed, in many cases (from Erdoğan's neo-Ottomanism to Chávez's *americanismo* and Varoufakis' DiEM25), the 'people' is constructed along international or transnational lines. For all these reasons, a conceptualization of populism that emphasizes what populists *do*, rather than what they *want*, is preferable.

Second, the international study of populism points to the need to develop a more sophisticated understanding of populism's relationship with state power. For international studies scholars, the role of the state (as both an actor and an arena of political competition) is paramount, whether one studies the impact of the international system on domestic politics or the processes and dynamics of foreign policymaking. Consequently, for populism theorists, the international actions of populists in power are an important corrective to views of populism as an emancipatory or anti-systemic phenomenon alone. Rather, populism has an inherent dual nature, both a movement to oppose the system from below and a mode of politics practised from above when adopted by peripheral or maverick members of the elite (Aslanidis 2017; Barr 2009). The phenomenon of populist foreign policy is a reminder that much of populism in the world actually operates within state power, which raises a host of conceptual and normative questions.

Again, a genuinely global perspective, as opposed to a West-centric one accustomed to seeing populists as radical outsiders excluded from state power most of the time and hapless when entering office, brings into focus a more nuanced picture of the role of populism. Nicos Mouzelis (1985) saw populism as a process of mass popular incorporation by political power at times of economic modernization in late-developing, peripheral societies. Kurt Weyland's (2001) framework of populism as a strategy to win and exercise political power was developed with an eye on the Latin American neopopulism of the 1990s, developed in response to major

systemic pressures on Latin America after the end of the Cold War and the imposition of the Washington Consensus. Peter Mair (2002) understood populism as a form of mass politics antithetical to ‘party democracy’, used to domesticate and neutralize popular demands under globalization. Hadiz (2016) sees Islamic populism as a political mode aimed at constructing cross-class coalitions to underpin new forms of state power under globalization, a perspective similar to a critical view of Thaksin’s rise post-financial crisis and IMF-imposed restructuring in Thailand (Jayasuriya and Hewison 2006).

Currently in Europe, we see how populism in government, from Hungary and Poland to Greece and Italy, has found ways to coexist with EU power structures, whereby an occasionally anti-Brussels rhetoric emanating from state power serves ultimately to neutralize more radical demands for democratization of the European project and to shelter powerful interests benefiting from it. Of course, there are important differences between right-wing populists like Viktor Orbán and left-wing populists like Alexis Tsipras, chiefly how their thick ideology determines sharply different terms of their accommodation with EU power structures – whether, for example, this will be based on constant nationalist turf wars against ‘Brussels’, as in the case of Orbán, or the espousal of a progressive vision of supranational cooperation, as in the case of Tsipras. The important point here, however, is, again, not the policy content of these critiques of the EU, but the commonality of ideologically different populists using a pro-people discourse to update the terms of the incorporation of domestic societies by state power, and of state power by regional market-based integration.

An international and cross-regional perspective of populism then calls upon populism theorists to appreciate better *populism’s ambiguous position between state power and people power*. While the two appear antithetical, the dividing line between them actually is quite fluid. Indeed, it is difficult to determine when exactly, during periods when international shifts open up opportunities for genuine representational challenges against the political system, movements of emancipation morph into strategies of domestication of societal interests by state power. As I have shown in an analysis of the *longue durée* of populism in Greek history since the nineteenth century, this is ultimately a cyclical process, as populism rotates in and out of political power, especially in peripheral societies that are in constant need of negotiating geopolitical and economic pressures from the Western core (Chryssogelos 2017b).

CONCLUSION

The study of the international dimensions of populism is a growing and promising field of research. However, while important advances have been made in recent years thanks to a proliferation of works on the international relations and foreign policy of populism, there still remain challenges for this research programme to move further ahead. Based on the preceding discussion, I identify here three: first, a broadening of the geographical and comparative scope of research, bringing debates and considerations about populism in the West more in contact with developments in the Global South; second, a widening of the conceptual net to include critical and discursive as well as mainstream perspectives in the study of populism as an international phenomenon; and finally, an openness from researchers both of IR and comparative politics to engage with works across sub-disciplines, accepting each other’s insights as opportunities to challenge long-held assumptions about populism. In this way, the study of

the international dimensions of populism can enrich not only IR and FPA, but also populism studies themselves.

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18. Ethnography

Marcos Emilio Pérez

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, the concept of populism has become increasingly prevalent. Pundits and journalists incorporate it in their analysis. Politicians refer to it during speeches and press conferences. Scholars and activists argue over it. Depending on the audience and speaker, this phenomenon can be everything from the solution to the troubles of an increasingly interconnected global society, to a catastrophic self-inflicted civilizational risk. Like few other notions, populism combines the attribution of high importance with an extremely varied set of conceptualizations.

The great diversity of takes on this concept is not only a sign of its relevance, but also a source of challenges in defining its characteristics and discussing its implications. In particular, the treatment of populism in the public arena suffers from three frequent limitations. First, it is overextended, in that the label ‘populist’ is applied to a very large variety of phenomena. Second, it is prejudiced, as it assumes that some constituencies are better able than others to identify their long-term interests. Third, it is sceptical of democracy, because it presents electorally popular policies as intrinsically suspicious when compared to technocratic ideas of the common good.

These challenges may suggest that the concept of populism is analytically useless. However, my argument is the opposite. The tensions expressed by populism are as old as democracy itself (Casullo 2019), meaning that social scientists should seek to better understand this contentious phenomenon using a broad array of methodologies. In this chapter, I will focus on one such tool: ethnography. I contend that this specific form of inquiry is uniquely well suited to address some of the definitional problems outlined above.

Ethnography is a method where researchers immerse themselves in the social worlds of a certain set of people (Emerson 2001; Lofland and Lofland 1995). Using participant observation, frequently complemented with other sources of qualitative and quantitative evidence, ethnographers aim to understand the world as their subjects see it. The goal is to provide what Clifford Geertz (1973) calls a ‘thick description’, a detailed account of the lives of respondents, in order to make it possible for an outsider to comprehend the meanings and motivations associated with their experiences. By getting as close as possible to a particular setting, this methodology helps us discern not only people’s activities in a given context, but also the thoughts and ideas associated with them.

The remainder of the chapter develops this argument. First, I elaborate on the main challenges associated with the public debate on populism: overextension, prejudice and democratic scepticism. Second, I explain how ethnography is a useful tool to address these challenges, due to its capacity to explore the translation of generalized macro-level agendas into micro-level, locally specific political appeals which resonate with the everyday experiences of individuals. Third, I exemplify this methodological advantage using case studies from the Global South and North. Finally, I conclude with a number of suggestions for future research.

POPULISM IN THE PUBLIC DEBATE

Populism, as Benjamin Moffitt says, ‘has become a popular catch-all for diagnosing all that is exciting, worrying, or dysfunctional in contemporary democracies worldwide’ (Moffitt 2020: 1). In recent years this concept has taken over political discourses, media narratives and scholarly discussions throughout the world (Stavrakakis 2017). Yet instead of generating greater clarity and insight, the overall result has frequently been a confusing barrage of dissonant voices (Bale et al. 2011; Schwörer 2021). Researchers have made progress towards a basic definition of populism, centred on the essential antagonism between the notions of people and establishment (Katsambekis 2022; Moffitt 2020). Yet beyond this (still limited) academic consensus, public debate about this phenomenon suffers from overextension, prejudice and democratic scepticism. These three problems constitute important challenges to the development of a multi-faceted, complex and empathetic understanding about an important aspect of social and political life throughout the globe.

Overextension means that the concept of populism has been applied to so many different cases, in so many different ways, that it becomes difficult to discern what is included in the definition and what is not. This problem is not limited to politicians and journalists. Despite remarkable growth in recent decades (or perhaps because of it), the academic literature on the topic continues to be fragmentary and contentious (Casullo 2019; Mazzarella 2019; Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017). Scholars cannot seem to settle on the nature of populism, much less on its overall effects on democratic governance and economic development. Other than some basic elements like the central role of the people/elites conflict, there is substantial disagreement about how to better conceptualize the phenomenon (Moffitt 2020). Populism has been analysed as a type of discourse (Casullo 2019; Laclau 2005), a specific political strategy (Weyland 2001), a particular form of ideology (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017) and a policy paradigm (Dornbusch and Edwards 1991; Rodrik 2018).

The problem with prejudice stems from the fact that populism is frequently depicted as the manipulation of a misguided and malleable electorate, which embraces short-term gains in detriment to their long-term welfare. Despite recent exceptions (De la Torre 2019; Moffitt 2020), the label ‘populist’ has rarely been self-claimed, instead being mostly applied derogatively to adversaries (Casullo 2019; Mazzarella 2019; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). This attribution by third parties reflects the fact that much of the conversation on populism derives from anti-populist frameworks, which work from the assumption that some segments of society are better able to identify their own interests than others (Semán 2021; Stavrakakis et al. 2018). In most cases, this distinction between those ‘available’ for populist mobilization and those who resist immediate political gratification reflects established preconceptions about who is capable of responsible citizenship (Meade 2019).

The third dilemma is a consequence of the previous one. The widespread perception that populism is a threat to democracy expresses well-founded concerns about the sustainability of pluralist and inclusionary political regimes. However, this position also relies on a substantial degree of democratic scepticism, for two reasons. First, it assumes the existence of a contrast between apolitical, objective policies leading to the common good, on the one hand, and widely popular policies which trade short-term rewards for long-term benefits, on the other (see Laclau 2005). That is, government decisions that are supported by large portions of the citizenry are not seen as legitimate expressions of the popular will, but instead as suspicious hand-outs to gain followers. Second, much of this debate has downplayed or even openly

dismissed the essential, albeit complex, relation between democracy and populism (Casullo 2019; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Populist movements can play a key role in the rise of authoritarianism, but they have also functioned throughout history as a powerful force for the political incorporation of formerly excluded sectors of the population (Asladinis 2017).

These problems constitute important challenges for the rigorous understanding of populism. However, they are not reason enough to discard the concept as useless or meaningless. In fact, the very existence of a puzzling yet energetic public debate on the issue constitutes an opportunity for scholars to make a crucial contribution. In this endeavour, different methodologies offer specific advantages. Among them, ethnography has the strength of allowing researchers to answer a central question: what does it entail for an individual to participate in a populist movement?

ETHNOGRAPHY AS A TOOL

From its origins as an anthropological tool to study the exotic ‘other’, ethnography has expanded vigorously to other disciplines, topics and locations. It is a methodology that requires time, patience and stamina. It is also fraught with ethical issues and logistical challenges. However, it offers a unique view into the complex lives of people.

The first principle behind ethnography is simple: a researcher approaches a specific case of study, develops relations with participants in it, and tries to observe as much as possible, writing detailed accounts at the end of each day. As they accumulate, notes from participant observation become a crucial source of evidence about the experiences of a certain group of people. In other words, ethnographers sacrifice breadth for depth, immersing themselves in a particular social world they want to understand. The second principle is the focus on local meanings. In other words, ethnographic work does not just aim to record what individuals do and say, but contextualize those findings with the goal of understanding how subjects see their world. Finally, the generalizability of ethnographic evidence relies less on statistical representativeness. Instead, the key is the identification of causal mechanisms that can be reasonably applied to similar cases and would be invisible using more quantifiable data (Emerson 2001; Emerson et al. 2011; Lofland and Lofland 1995).

Ethnographic studies vary in their particular characteristics. Depending on the topic, the site analysed, the background of the researcher and the resources available for his or her analysis, projects can be extremely diverse. Some involve profound immersion, to the point that the scholar becomes an insider into the group under analysis. Others require a more distant role, in which observation takes precedence over participation. As the methodology has expanded, researchers have used it to address a broader set of questions and have experimented with different ways to learn from respondents. In addition, ethnography is frequently complemented with other methodologies such as archival work, in-depth interviews, survey analysis, mapping tools and photography.

Some of the defining features of ethnography make it seem an odd choice for exploring an issue like populism. The circumscribed focus on a particular case study, the inevitable sacrifice of large sample sizes in exchange for an in-depth immersion in the lives of few respondents, the necessary contingency of findings on a particular spatial and temporal environment, all suggest that this form of inquiry is not fit to analyse a global phenomenon. While this is

a valid argument, this chapter will dispute it. In fact, those very features make ethnography an exceptionally useful tool to improve our understanding of populism.

Populism is, in the end, a phenomenon that takes place in the daily lives of people and communities. Attention to these locally specific environments can help generate crucial insight into what makes certain discourses, strategies, ideas and/or policies attractive and meaningful. As Marco Garrido (2017) shows in his ethnographic study of electoral politics in the Philippines, individuals do not passively embrace populist messages, but instead perceive different candidates in various ways according to deeply held criteria. In other words, voters have a substantial degree of agency and autonomy in their choice of which electoral options to follow, as evidenced by the fact that many politicians and parties employ a populist style but not all obtain widespread support. Their unequal success means that some of their messages are more resonant than others with the experiences of different sectors of the electorate.

The value of ethnography for the study of populism lies precisely in the analysis of these connections between dynamics at different levels of analysis. Populism is frequently studied as a macro-level phenomenon, something that applies to large geographical entities (states, nations, regions) and to broad political organizations (parties, movements, governments). However, the strength of populism lies ultimately in its appeal to individuals. Without exploring the ways in which micro-level actors (people, groups, families, neighbourhoods) perceive and participate in populist movements and parties, any understanding of the phenomenon will be fundamentally limited.

In other words, ethnography allows us to see how the macro-level populist platforms and tactics find expression in micro-level dynamics. As Belinda Robnett (1997) and Wendy Wolford (2010) emphasize in their studies of social mobilization in the United States and Brazil, respectively, the success of a political movement at generating support depends on its ability to connect agendas at the national level into context-specific cultural scripts which resonate with the backgrounds and experiences of potential participants. That is, the overall agenda of a movement must undergo a process of translation into symbolic frames that are meaningful at the micro level, what Wolford calls 'localized moral economies' (Wolford 2010: 19). The main features of any populist movement carry particular meanings for different individuals and communities. It is precisely these locally specific understandings, crucial for comprehending the motivations of adherents, which ethnography is designed to unpack. If populism persists because it provides convincing interpretations of how the world is and should be (Casullo 2019), then we must focus on how this process works at lower levels of analysis.

ETHNOGRAPHIES OF POPULISM

Fortunately, there is both a great number of studies relevant to understanding how populism operates at the micro level, as well as many opportunities for engaging in an immersive qualitative analysis of the subject. Over the last decade, a promising literature has developed, using ethnography to problematize established assumptions about populist politics, as well as tackling questions that other methodologies sometimes downplay. Some scholars have challenged expectations about the top-bottom, leader-centric and right-wing nature of populist movements (Meade 2019). Others have explored the reasons why some populist tactics are more effective than others (Garrido 2017), analysed the complex emotional dynamics involved in populist

mobilization (Eklundh 2019) and delved into the grassroots-level contradictions prevalent in seemingly unified movements (Wilde 2017; also see Stavrakakis et al. 2016).

Like much of the existing academic work on populism, research using participant observation to analyse the phenomenon has three interrelated characteristics. The first is its fragmentary nature: there is hardly a well-defined, dedicated body of ethnographic knowledge on the topic, but instead a large number of diverse works dealing with different aspects of the issue. The second characteristic is a great deal of interdisciplinarity, as many fields in the social sciences and humanities have offered their insight. Finally, studies at the intersection between ethnographic methodologies and populist-related questions overlap with a great deal of broader issues, such as collective action, identity, stratification and globalization.

The combination of these three features means that there is much space for the development of immersive analyses of the micro dynamics of populist mobilization around the world. We can count on a great theoretical base on which to build, as well as the potential for generating important insight, not just in our specific area, but also on many other relevant issues. As Paul Mepschen argues in his analysis of the Netherlands case:

We must analyse the construction and everyday appropriation of populist rhetoric and imaginaries... What we need, therefore, are detailed studies of the social construction of the people, the boundary practices that bring 'the people' to social life in particular local contexts, and in and through which their identity is forged and certain layers of citizens thus become called into being as part of a very particular partition of the social – 'the people'. (Mepschen 2016: 63)

In sum, studies that use ethnographic methods to illuminate populism belong to many disciplines and frequently focus on broader processes. This multi-field nature is one of the main strengths of this literature. I illustrate with two examples, one from the Global South and another from the Global North. First, the persistent appeal of Peronism in poor neighbourhoods of Argentina. Second, the radicalization of conservative voters in the United States.

Populism in the Global South: The Persistence of Peronism in Argentina

Until the proliferation of European far-right parties around the turn of the century, the analysis of populism mostly centred on the Global South. As a result, much of the scholarly literature has traditionally seen this political phenomenon as a challenge to economic growth and a sign of immature democracies (see for example Dornbusch and Edwards 1991; Walker 2008).

Argentina's Peronism is an example of this narrative. The history and legacy of this movement continues to be hotly debated. The 1945–1955 presidencies of Juan Domingo Perón entailed a massive redistribution of income, the implementation of generous social policies and an expansion in voting rights (in particular, the enfranchisement of women). This consolidated Peronism as a major source of political identity for vast segments of the population, especially among the working classes. The movement was able to survive years of proscription, bloody internal conflicts and state terrorism. Not even the party's open embrace of neoliberal policies in the 1990s was able to break its influence on Argentina's society. Almost 80 years since its emergence, Peronism remains the most important political force in the country.

Many factors have contributed to the persistence of this movement. Its fluid internal structure allowed it to encompass many different currents, often in conflict with each other, as well as adapt to various environments. The development of patronage networks, based originally on union affiliation and later on neighbourhood groups, have allowed it to play a central role

in the life of working-class communities (Levitsky 2003). However, much of the sustained influence of Peronism is linked to its resonance with established notions of labour, family and community at the local level. One of the main findings of ethnographies focused on the party's grassroots networks is that its appeal among activists and voters entails far more than the distribution of resources (Gaztañaga 2013; Vommaro and Quirós 2011). Instead, the practices, agendas and narratives surrounding Peronist organizations at the neighbourhood level resonate with central aspects of political culture in these communities, which are shared by other forms of public life. At this level, the general (and frequently vague) ideology of Peronism is expressed in concrete and widely shared notions such as the existence of relations of trust and reciprocity between organizers and constituencies, the semantic association between efforts and rewards and the idealization of a breadwinner–homemaker family structure associated with manual labour.

An example of this dynamic is shown in Javier Auyero's (2001) study of clientelistic networks in a shantytown in Buenos Aires. Through a months-long immersive ethnography, Auyero describes how the residents' support for the Peronist government (which at the time was implementing drastic neoliberal reforms which severely impoverished the community) did not rely simply on an exchange of favours for votes. Instead, the practices of local party officials were embedded in ideas like the reliance on mutual trust, the mediation of patrons between residents and the state and the use of Peronist symbols and performances (linked to the welfare-associated image of Eva Perón) as shared sources of identity.

In a similar research in a different neighbourhood of Greater Buenos Aires, Julieta Quirós (2006, 2011) compared the work of low-level Peronist Party officials with left-wing grassroots activists. She discovered that despite the proclaimed antagonism between both actors, residents in the area frequently participated in both. While at higher levels organizers and the party were at odds with each other, in the neighbourhood both were immersed in the same set of expectations and standards, which affected their work and imposed similarities. The continued resonance between these ideals and the personal histories of residents explains the sustained role of Peronism in their communities.

Sabina Frederic (2009) found comparable results in her fieldwork on local politics in yet another area of Buenos Aires. Contrary to macro-level interpretations which separate traditional Peronist actors from newer forms of collective action, Frederic insists that shared experiences, challenges and perceptions generate all sorts of overlaps between diverse institutions within neighbourhoods. The existence of a common grassroots logic means that distinctions that are meaningful for national and state politics carry less weight when the focus is placed on community life.

In sum, a key aspect of Peronism's persistence is the resonance between macro- and micro-level dynamics. Exclusive attention to the former may ignore the reasons why individuals choose to identify with the movement. More crucially, neglecting the micro-level dynamics of populist mobilization can give credence to simplistic or deprecating explanations of people's political ideas. This problem is hardly particular to Argentina.

Populism in the Global North: The Radicalization of Grassroots American Conservatism

In the last decade, growing right-wing extremism in developed nations has raised the alarm of observers. The triumph of Donald Trump in the United States, the Brexit referendum in the

United Kingdom and the continued success of parties like the National Rally in France and Lega in Italy suggest that democracies which until recently were considered stable and inclusive are at risk of backsliding into authoritarianism. Populist movements in these nations have achieved remarkable success, which is not even exclusive to the right, as the cases of Podemos in Spain and SYRIZA in Greece illustrate.

The radicalization of the American conservative movement is a prime example of these developments. The explosive growth of the Tea Party after Barack Obama's election, the documented expansion in far-right violence, the rise of Donald Trump and the turmoil surrounding the 2020 election have all generated concerns that a substantial portion of the electorate in the United States no longer adheres to the basic democratic contract.

Macro-level explanations for this development abound. Some point to economic dynamics since the 1970s such as deindustrialization, growing disparities of income and stagnant wages (see, for instance, Klein 2016; Packer 2016). Others highlight the social anxieties generated by a rapidly diversifying nation, as dominant demographic sectors see their claim to representativeness undermined (for example, see Abrajano and Hajnal 2015; Anderson 2016). Without a doubt, the combination of rising inequality with the endurance of long-term prejudices is an explosive mix.

However, the story at the micro level is more complex. Ethnographic studies of right-wing voters and organizations demonstrate that economic and social anxieties express themselves in locally specific ways. The appeal of nativism, nationalism and conservatism is not uniform: it works by relating the everyday experiences of individuals to narratives and strategies prevalent at the national level.

For instance, Arlie Hochschild's (2016) study of conservative activists in southern Louisiana uses interviews, participant observation and focus groups to explore why individuals and their families support policies which cause their community to suffer from widespread poverty and environmental degradation. This immersion allows her to overcome what she calls the 'empathy walls' and uncover her respondents' 'deep story'. Hochschild uses the metaphor of waiting in line to explain the concerns of these people: the feeling of being stuck, the resentment at government officials who help outsiders 'cut in line' and the shame at being looked down upon by cultural elites.

Another example is Katherine Cramer's (2016) analysis of Wisconsin politics in the contentious years leading to governor Scott Walker's failed 2012 recall. Unlike most studies of public opinion, which use polls to assess what people think, Cramer used an ethnographic analysis to study how people come to hold certain viewpoints. By repeatedly immersing herself in casual conversations with voters across the state, she discovered the central role that a rural-based identity plays in their political views. Polarization and radicalization among conservatives in Wisconsin has much to do with negative attitudes towards residents of the state's cities, which are seen as exploitative and disrespectful towards the inhabitants of the countryside. These 'politics of resentment' towards urban citizens are then capitalized on by candidates and elected officials, undermining redistributive policies and furthering political divisions.

The difference between meanings at the national and grassroots levels is not limited to rank-and-file voters but also applies to more extremist groups. Harel Shapira's (2013) book on vigilantes on the United States–Mexico border provides an example. Shapira argues that the reason these people participate in armed vigils looking for unauthorized crossers does not lie, as might be expected, in any particular view about immigration. Despite belonging to a right-wing militia, some of his respondents even express sympathetic opinions towards

foreigners. In fact, captures of crossers are rather infrequent. In contrast, the appeal of the movement lies in the practice of soldiering, which allows these men to escape similar feelings as those described by Hochschild's respondents: alienation from a changing mainstream culture and the feeling that their country no longer belongs to them.

The expansion of the far right in the United States has many reasons. Yet if we are to understand the appeal of conservative populism for communities across the country, it is essential to identify how macro-level agendas and strategies find expression at the micro level. The embracing of nativism, prejudice and violence is not inevitable, but is the result of context-specific dynamics, which ethnography is uniquely capable of dissecting.

CONCLUSION

Understanding a complex phenomenon like populism requires attention to its many facets and expressions. One of the main ways to contribute to this task is through studying the day-to-day lives of those who find populist strategies and narratives compelling. Ethnography is a particularly effective tool for understanding these micro-level dynamics. This, in turn, entails three important attitudes.

First, it becomes essential to actually get close to the supporters of populist movements. The public discourse about these individuals frequently suffers from inaccurate assumptions (Gusterson 2017). Sympathetic observers describe them as manipulated victims of social forces beyond their control, while critics portray them as entrapped by prejudice and ignorance. Yet both sets of views agree in denying these people agency, as if they were incapable of analysing their situation and making political decisions. Only extended and profound immersion in the lives of these communities can overcome the 'empathy walls' that prevent understanding their motivations (Hochschild 2016). By focusing on particular case studies, ethnography can undermine the preconceptions that plague much of the discussion about populism.

Second, studies on populism can benefit from what Dianne Vaughan (2004) calls 'analogical theorizing', that is, the development of concepts by comparing processes that apply to diverse phenomena. Two especially important sources of insight are the field of social movement theory, with its emphasis on what makes people develop attachments to a particular organization or cause, and the literature on identity formation, with its focus on the ways in which individuals and groups define the us/them binary.

Finally, ethnography should be seen as a tool to question the automatic use of populism as a derogatory term. Such an attitude is not only dismissive of the experiences of many people, it is also inimical to an accurate understanding of the phenomenon (Stavrakakis 2017). Populism is far from a contingent aberration: it shares an intimate bond with democracy, expressing many of the tensions between the notions of popular will and constitutional guarantees. As long as democratic rule exists, so will populism (Casullo 2019; Moffit 2020). We may as well study the complex ways in which people engage in it.

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19. Populist constitutionalism

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INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I examine whether there is a distinctively populist constitutional ideology. Contrary to the widespread view that populism is inherently anti-pluralist, anti-institutional and, hence, incompatible with constitutionalism, I argue that different variations of populism account for different approaches towards constitutionalism; some variations may indeed distort it, while others are compatible with and even have the potential to revitalize it.

The chapter proceeds as follows. In the next section, I explore the varying constitutional implications of different forms of populism. Then, I identify as a minimum, or starting point, that all populists share their critique of contemporary constitutional orthodoxy. I proceed by associating ‘populist constitutionalism’ in that sense with popular and political constitutionalism. Whereas progressive and emancipatory populism shares the democratizing and transformative potential of the latter, I conclude, authoritarian populism negates it. This, then, calls for a clearer demarcation between populism and authoritarianism.

POPULISM AND CONSTITUTIONALISM

The global rise of populism raises, among others, the question of its relation to constitutionalism. Do populists have a distinctive constitutional vision? What is their stance towards the principles and institutions of constitutional democracy? How does the political success of populists affect existing constitutional settings and understandings? One way to put this is to ask: ‘Are populists friends or foes of constitutionalism?’ (Mudde 2013: 2).

According to a widespread view, populism poses a challenge, indeed a threat, to constitutional democracy (Corrias 2016: 8; Pinelli 2011: 5). This view detects a ‘claim to *exclusive* moral representation of the real or authentic people’ at the core of populism, which makes it necessarily anti-pluralist, inherently anti-institutional and hence incompatible with constitutionalism (Müller 2017: 591–593, emphasis in original). Experience with authoritarian populists around the world attempting to dismantle their country’s constitution seems to confirm this conclusion. In his paradigmatic study on Poland, Wojciech Sadurski describes the process of what he calls ‘anti-constitutional populist backsliding’, which eventually leads to constitutional breakdown (Sadurski 2019: ch. 1). This view gives a rather straightforward answer to the question above: populism is antithetical to constitutionalism. Let us call this ‘the incompatibility thesis’.

Scholars of populism, however, have warned against such generalizations, pointing out that the phenomenon’s relation to constitutionalism is variable and highly context-specific (Rovira Kaltwasser 2013: 6–7). There are different kinds of populism, distinguished along a variety of axes and groupings: right-wing or left-wing, exclusionary or inclusionary, authoritarian or democratic. While all populists share a commitment to a strong notion of ‘the people’ as

opposed to ‘the elite’, claiming to ‘truly’ represent the common people against a corrupt and unresponsive establishment, they nevertheless differ greatly in their approach towards constitutionalism. One crucial difference is the way populists define who belongs to the people. While exclusionary populism focuses on the exclusion of non-native groups, inclusionary populism aspires to give voice to marginalized and underrepresented groups (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013: 158–166). Moreover, the alleged homogeneity of the people as a defining element of populism, which necessarily equates populism with anti-pluralism and illiberalism, overlooks the kind of progressive populism that signifies the people ‘as an open, inclusive and pluralist subject’ (Katsambekis 2020: 10). It is perhaps wiser, then, to talk about populisms (in the plural) rather than populism (in the singular). Hence, the initial question can be reformulated: What is the relation of different types of populism to constitutionalism?

For a start, certain constitutional scholars have acknowledged that the distinctions between right-wing and left-wing (Tushnet 2018: 639), authoritarian and democratic (Bugarič 2019a: 390–391) or communitarian and cosmopolitan populism (Koch 2021: 402, 409–410) are important for the study of its relation to constitutionalism. It is true that populism is often nationalist, nativist, racist or xenophobic; but progressive, emancipatory and indeed democratic populism is also possible (Blokker 2019c: 342–343; Bugarič 2019b: 41–42; Halmai 2019: 297–298; Johnson 2020: 196–204). Other scholars have cautioned that the label ‘authoritarian populist’ is sometimes attributed to autocrats that are not really committed to populism in any meaningful sense but only use populist rhetoric in an instrumental way to conceal their purely authoritarian aims (Scheppele 2019: 329). In this respect, a distinction is being made between arguably ‘true’ and ‘false’ populism, only the former deserving the name (Halmai 2019: 298).²

If one takes into account the widely different variations of populism, it becomes clear that populists have equally widely different stances towards constitutional democracy. Andrew Arato and Jean Cohen correctly note that there is no such thing as a genuinely populist version of constitutionalism (Arato and Cohen 2022: 173). Populists do not have a distinct constitutional vision. Populism, however defined, does neither presuppose a particular constitutional ideology nor a specific approach to constitution-making and constitutional law. No populist playbook or toolkit exists on constitutional matters (whereas there might exist an authoritarian playbook). Indeed, populists, not unlike most political forces, tend to be rather opportunistic towards constitutions. Where a constitution helps them advance their cause, populists will endorse and support it; where it does not, they will downplay its importance, criticize it, pervert its meaning or try to amend or even replace it when they come to power (Mudde 2013: 4–6; Szente 2021: 11). This, however, is not exclusive to populists; non-populists quite often exhibit such opportunism as well. Moreover, constitutional opportunism alone does not vindicate the thesis that populism is (always) incompatible with constitutionalism.

Nevertheless, Arato and Cohen effectively adopt the incompatibility thesis, insisting that ‘the very logic of populism... in both left and right variants, points to political authoritarianism’ (Arato and Cohen 2022: 1–2). They do so, however, because they employ a rather ‘thick’ definition of populism. Key dimensions of this definition are the idea of a unitary people symbolically represented, in a *pars pro toto* logic, by a mobilized part, typically embodied in a single charismatic leader, as well as a friend–enemy conception of politics (Arato and Cohen 2022: 13, 89, 153). This definition, however, leaves out much of what could be acknowledged as populist; notably, it precludes variants of emancipatory and inclusionary populism. The alleged monism of populism, the notion of ‘the people’ as one in a *pars pro toto* logic (parti-

ality supplanting the totality), is often nothing more than a synecdoche, which is a common rhetorical trope in social and political life (Stavrakakis 2020: 14–16). Hence, as Yannis Stavrakakis argues, ‘populism is many things beyond the boogeyman of democracy portrayed by many liberal theorists... it often operates as a force rejuvenating democratic institutions and deepening popular participation’ (Stavrakakis 2020: 4).

Much depends, then, on the definition one gives to populism (but also to constitutionalism, as I will argue in the next section). Mark Tushnet and Bojan Bugarič follow a different path. They refrain from any definition and, instead, identify several ‘themes’, as they call them, in different variants of populism, not all of which appear in every variant (Tushnet and Bugarič 2021: 2, 54).³ This approach is flexible enough to accommodate all kinds of populism. Not surprisingly, Tushnet and Bugarič reject the incompatibility thesis. Their conclusion is that some forms of populism are inconsistent with constitutionalism while others aren’t. As they put it: ‘Sometimes authoritarian populism leads to democratic backsliding and breakdown, and sometimes democratic populism fosters democratization’ (Tushnet and Bugarič 2021: 38). Moreover, when populists slide into authoritarianism, they are hardly populists anymore; rather they are best described as ‘authoritarians masquerading as populists’ (Tushnet and Bugarič 2021: 38, quoting Johnson 2020: 192).

We can test this approach vis-à-vis what is probably the most common criticism of populism. Populists, it is often said, are ‘impatient with procedures’ (Müller 2017: 590). While this is generally true, it doesn’t necessarily mean that (all) populism is inherently anti-institutional. It certainly can be and very often has been. There is ample evidence of populists in power trying to bypass, capture or even abolish constitutional institutions, especially courts, that stand in their way. In doing so, they undermine key features of constitutional democracy such as judicial independence, the rights of opposition, freedom of the press and civil rights. In such cases, populism is indeed incompatible with constitutionalism (see e.g. Sadurski 2019: chs 3–6). However, this is not always the case. Sometimes, the reform or even replacement of constitutional institutions, including the constitution itself, aspires to correct deficits and failures of ‘real existing’ constitutional democracies, notably their inadequate representation and democratic deficits. Indeed, institutional reformism is quite common with populists. It’s not difficult to see why. Populists generally target the elite establishment for being corrupt and unresponsive to popular demands. Elites, however, are often supported by ‘a strongly entrenched and self-reinforcing status quo’ (Johnson 2020: 208). There is generally a rather strong status quo bias built into constitutional institutions, including the judiciary. Reforming existing institutions that tend to reproduce the status quo becomes then central to populist strategies. But this is not particular to populism; it has been, historically, at the very heart of any modern democratic reform. Hence, ‘populist “confrontations” with constitutionalism are often nothing more – or less – than attempts to find appropriate institutions, consistent with commitments to constitutionalism, that allow populists to deal with the political challenges they face’ (Tushnet and Bugarič 2021: 5). Simply put, institutional reformism is not in itself a threat to constitutionalism. It all depends on the specific ways the reforms are carried out. Some reforms may indeed distort constitutionalism, but others may be perfectly compatible with it and even revitalize it.

There is a broader discussion about populism and constitutional change (Blokker 2021: 300–310; Landau 2018: 526–541). Often (though, not always), populists propose or implement sweeping changes to the constitution. Sometimes, they even succeed in replacing the existing constitution with a new one. However, genuinely ‘populist constitutions’ in that sense

are still a rarity, the three ‘neo-Bolivarian’ constitutions (Venezuela 1999, Ecuador 2008, Bolivia 2009) and perhaps also the 2011 Hungarian constitution (which, however, enabled an authoritarian rather than genuinely populist turn) being probably the most prominent examples. Of course, constitutional change, including the aspiration to dismantle the ‘old’ institutional order, is not per se a bad thing. It becomes a threat to democracy when it aims to consolidate power in the hands of populists (Landau 2018: 532–537). But, other than that, populist constitutional change can also be innovative and enable constitutional experimentation ‘that might rejuvenate ossified or failing constitutional orders’ (Landau 2018: 523). We should also bear in mind that not all populists engage in projects of constitutional change; some lack the necessary political power and others simply do not need to, when the existing constitution does not significantly obstruct them to pursue their policies.

Now, the ability of populists to pursue their constitutional agendas depends on a number of variables. For instance, consolidated democracies with robust institutional systems are generally less susceptible to constitutional change than are weaker and unstable regimes (Koch 2021: 401). But the most important variable is the populists’ position within the political system. The potential for constitutional change greatly depends on whether populists are in opposition or in government and, in the latter case, whether they are a minor or the dominant partner in a governing coalition or whether they alone form a single-party government. Moreover, a crucial threshold is whether populists can achieve a constitution-amending or even constitution-making (super)majority. Arato and Cohen have refined this variable, indicating four organizational forms that populism can take: mobilization (or movement); party; government; and regime. Each of these forms or ‘stages’ provides different opportunities for constitutional change (Arato and Cohen 2022: 14–17, 153–175). Obviously, only populists in power are in a position to amend or replace a constitution. But the constitutional critique articulated by populists in opposition may also have an agenda-setting and policy impact (Lacey 2019: 86–89).

THE POPULIST CRITIQUE OF LIBERAL CONSTITUTIONALISM

By now, the reader may have come to the conclusion that there is nothing distinctive about populism’s relation to constitutionalism.⁴ If the (non-)answer to the question of compatibility is ‘it depends’, perhaps there is no such thing as populist constitutionalism (Halmai 2018: 7; see also Arato and Cohen 2022: 175–184). Could it be, then, that trying to identify a core, or shared, constitutional implication of populism(s) is a futile undertaking? Not quite. While there are very few things, if any, that all populists stand *for* regarding constitutionalism, they do seem to agree on what they stand *against*. Populism, in any of its variants, entails a critique of contemporary constitutional orthodoxy, that is, of the prevailing legalistic understanding of liberal constitutionalism and of the processes of depoliticization, anti-majoritarianism and judicial empowerment associated with it (Blokker 2019a: 535–536). This is a negative rather than positive stance; it is a form of constitutional critique and ‘counter-constitutionalism’ that ‘brings to the fore the intrinsic problems of a one-sided legal constitutionalism grounded in hierarchy, judicial prerogative, foundationalism, and depoliticization, which tends to result in a lack of democratic interaction and engagement of larger society with constitutionalism’ (Blokker 2019b: 125). In that sense, populism is ‘a mirror’, that ‘spur[s] us to confront and

respond to the weaknesses of liberal democracy’ (Landau 2018: 543). Indeed, ‘populism arises in part from the “broken promises” of democracy itself’ (Lacey 2019: 85).

This kind of constitutional critique is the bare minimum, or the starting point, that all populists share, explicitly or implicitly. Importantly, this is a critique not of constitutionalism as such but, specifically, of *liberal* constitutionalism in its contemporary legalistic guise. It is this – and only this – that can be properly called ‘populist constitutionalism’, in the sense of a shared and distinctively populist, even if only negative and incomplete, understanding of constitutionalism. Anything beyond that, any other constitutional discourse or practice by populists, which we could perhaps call ‘constitutional populism’, is contingent rather than inherent.⁵ Moreover, it sometimes ends up in negating constitutionalism itself (and not just a specific variant thereof). This is certainly the case with authoritarian populists’ attempts to dismantle constitutional democracy altogether, or what has been called ‘anti-constitutional populism’ (Sadurski 2019: ch. 1).

Andrew Arato and Jean Cohen define constitutionalism as ‘the rule of law principle of the limitation of all state powers, in the name of securing individual and collective forms of autonomy and participation’ (Arato and Cohen 2002: 176). The principles of constitutionalism may exist in different forms but, in any case, they need to be institutionalized. The most important institutions of contemporary constitutional democracies are the differentiation of constituent and constituted powers, the separation of powers and the protection of liberal rights of autonomy as well as democratic rights of participation. Such institutionalization may take different forms – comprising liberal, republican and democratic elements in various combinations – but ‘it is only the mutual re-enforcement of institutions of autonomy and participation (fundamental liberal and democratic rights) and institutions of separation (constituent vs. constituted powers, separation of powers, federalism, local government) that can yield constitutionalism’ (Arato and Cohen 2002: 177).

This is a definition of constitutionalism on which most legal and political theorists could agree. Yet, it is important to note that democratic constitutions not only restrain state power; they also legitimize it by establishing the institutions and procedures of democracy that enable the articulation of the popular will. Thus, constitutionalism has both a limiting as well as a constituting or empowering function, which are inextricably linked to one another. Indeed, the latter poses itself also a limitation to state power: ‘limits and empowerment fundamentally belong together’ (Arato and Cohen 2002: 176). The limiting (or liberal) and the constituting (or democratic) ‘moments’ of constitutionalism can be institutionalized in different forms and in varying degrees (Scott 2013: 2165–2176). However, the prevalent understanding of contemporary *liberal* constitutionalism, or what is often called ‘legal constitutionalism’, tends to overemphasize constitutionalism’s limiting dimension, while downplaying its enabling dimension. Take, for example, this definition: liberal constitutionalism ‘typically hinges on a written constitution that includes an enumeration of individual rights, the existence of rights-based judicial review, a heightened threshold for constitutional amendment, a commitment to periodic democratic elections, and a commitment to the rule of law’ (Ginsburg et al. 2018: 239). The liberal component appears rather thick here, while the democratic relatively thin, virtually reduced to safeguarding free and fair elections. Democracy, however, is more than that. Alternative understandings of *democratic* constitutionalism place greater emphasis on popular rule than adherents of the prevalent understanding are willing to accept. Popular constitutionalism and political constitutionalism, as we will see in the next section, are versions of such democratic alternatives. The populist critique of liberal democracy, or what

I have identified as populist constitutionalism, while falling short of a comprehensive constitutional theory, is nevertheless also an expression of democratic constitutionalism (Blokker 2021: 299–300).

Both liberal and democratic variants remain within the ambit of the overarching category of constitutionalism as the ideology of modern liberal democracy. Hence, as with other democratic critiques of liberal constitutionalism, the populist critique – understood as the minimum or starting point shared by all populists – is articulated from *within* liberal democracy. Populist constitutionalism in that sense, while accepting both sides of ‘the defining tension of modern constitutionalism’ (Walker 2019: 518–519), aims nevertheless, at least implicitly, to democratize liberal democracy by strengthening its democratic component. Populist constitutionalism does not oppose constitutionalism as such but only its one-sided liberal variants. It is only the authoritarian versions of constitutional populism that go beyond the (minimal) populist-constitutionalist critique that question liberal democracy and, hence, constitutionalism itself.

The populist critique of liberal constitutionalism is best captured by what Paul Blokker calls ‘legal resentment’ (Blokker 2019a: 548–551; 2019b: 120–123). This is a sceptical attitude towards the excessive juridification (and hence depoliticization) of society. Populist constitutionalism opposes the tendency to regard constitutional or apex courts as the final arbiters of social and political conflict, and decries the empowerment of independent authorities, central banks and similar national, international or supranational institutions that promote technocratic governance over majoritarian politics and, more broadly, the primacy of law over politics. Put simply, populists contend that important decisions that affect people’s lives should not be taken away from the people and left to unelected and unaccountable officials.

A crucial aspect of the populist critique is that liberal constitutionalism downplays and even obstructs the political energy of ‘ordinary’ people as opposed to elites. Increasing the withdrawal and disengagement of citizens results in the hollowing-out of democracy: ‘conventional politics has become part of an external world which people view from outside’ (Mair 2013: 43). It is not only that judicial, administrative and technocratic elites often substitute their own judgement, based on their expertise, for the popular will – judicial review of democratically enacted legislation being an obvious example here. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, economic elites have come to dominate democratic politics by capturing the governing elites – a corrupt political establishment – in ways that effectively exclude ordinary people and disregard their interests (McCormick 2017: 1–2). Hence, the core of populist constitutionalism is its anti-elitism and, more broadly, its anti-establishment attitude (Corso 2022: 68–69). Interestingly, anti-elitism has also been identified by some scholars as the minimal common core of populism itself, which is defined as ‘a people-centred form of anti-elite politics in democracies’ (Koch 2021: 406) or as ‘the people in moral battle against the elites’ (Mansbridge and Macedo 2019: 60). In that respect, the empirical fact that (so-called) populists are in some cases part of the elite establishment themselves, merely using anti-elitist rhetoric to conceal their authoritarian aims, may mean that they are not really populist, properly understood, but rather plainly authoritarian.

POPULIST, POPULAR AND POLITICAL CONSTITUTIONALISM

The term ‘populist constitutionalism’ has been used in recent literature to refer to the constitutional discourses and practices of populists. I have argued in the previous section that it is probably more appropriate to reserve the term, denoting a sub-type of constitutionalism, to the populist critique of liberal constitutionalism (whereas ‘constitutional populism’ could be a convenient alternative for the broader interaction of populists with constitutions). However, the term ‘populist constitutionalism’ is not novel. It had been used in the past, before being appropriated by scholars of populism, to describe something different than – although not entirely unrelated to – the relationship between populism and constitutionalism. In the 1990s, several progressive constitutional scholars in the United States developed populist constitutionalism as a critical approach to constitutional law that rejects the idea that the constitution means what judicial elites say it means and emphasizes the role of the elected branches of government, and ultimately of the people themselves, in constitutional law (for an excellent overview, see Corso 2014). That was a purely academic, and not political, endeavour.

By the last decades of the twentieth century, the global expansion of judicial review of legislation has been the catalyst for the emergence of a constitutional orthodoxy, according to which the central element of constitutionalism is the ability of courts (and other non-majoritarian institutions) to restrain politics. Some commentators call this ‘legal constitutionalism’, while others pejoratively talk about ‘juristocracy’ (Hirschl 2004: 211–224). Populist constitutionalism has been a critical academic reaction to this trend. It contends that judge-made constitutional law conceals an elite-driven attempt to insulate policymaking from democratic politics and, hence, from the wants and needs of the people. This kind of critique invokes notions of popular sovereignty and self-government as well as an, unmistakably populist, underlying assumption in favour of the political energy of ordinary people. Indeed, populist constitutionalism ‘rests on anthropological assumptions benevolent to ordinary people usually denied by the conventional view of constitutionalism’ (Corso 2014: 444).

In probably the first major contribution to this line of critical theorizing, Harvard law professor Richard D. Parker proclaimed in the early 1990s ‘a constitutional populist manifesto’, challenging the basic ‘orthodoxies’ of conventional constitutional theory, most importantly the idea that the main mission of constitutional law is to protect individuals and minorities against the majority (Parker 1993: 531). Parker juxtaposes the ‘anti-populist sensibility’ characterizing much of conventional theory, that is, the scepticism, if not hostility, towards the political energy of ordinary people, manifested in the idea that constitutional reason is there to tame the people’s passions, with a ‘populist sensibility’ that promotes the political participation of ordinary people over their passivity or insulation (Parker 1993: 552–557). The core of his argument is rather simple: constitutional law, he contends, ‘should be devoted as much – and even more – to *promote* majority rule as to *limit* it’ (Parker 1993: 532, emphasis in original). Rejecting the underlying assumption that ‘the very idea of a constitution is to establish some bedrock restraints on ordinary politics’, Parker praises the transformative potential of politics, concluding that ‘constitutions are not incompatible with the idea behind populism. They are *embedded* within it’ (Parker 1993: 583, emphasis in original).

A few years later, Yale law professor Jack Balkin argued that constitutional theory has grown away from popular attitudes and popular culture, and may benefit from populism if it is to promote the interests and attitudes of ordinary citizens. For Balkin:

the importance of populism rests not only in its distinctive conception of democracy, but in its lessons about the social construction of judgements... A populist constitutionalism demands that academics become more self-conscious about their status as members of a subculture whose elite values tend to shape and occasionally distort their perspectives... In particular, populism requires professors of constitutional law to forgo their privileges as academics... In any case, the goal of populist constitutionalism is neither anti-intellectualism nor academic self-loathing. It is rather a richer and fuller understanding of the self and its place in the larger political community... Through this process all of us may hope to understand better what our commitment to democracy – rule by the people – truly means. (Balkin 1995: 1990)

By the end of the decade, Mark Tushnet, later also a Harvard law professor, offered the most elaborate version of this kind of critique, by contrasting what he calls ‘populist constitutional law’ with ‘the elitist constitutional law that dominates contemporary legal thinking’ (Tushnet 1999: xi). How ordinary people – as opposed to legal professionals – deal with the constitution is at the heart of a populist theory of constitutional law. Politics partly revolves around the proper realization of constitutional principles and the choice among competing visions about their meaning; by participating in politics, the people contribute to the creation of constitutional meaning. Populist constitutional law rests on a commitment to democracy and, more particularly, on the idea that constitutional responsibility should be distributed broadly throughout the population and constitutional law should be ‘in the hands of the people themselves’ (Tushnet 1999: 182). Hence, populist constitutional law takes seriously the people’s constitutional considerations, as articulated through politics, and focuses on democratic and legislative, rather than judicial, responsibility for enforcing the constitution. It enables the people to take an active role, ‘whether we act in the streets, in the voting booths, or in legislatures as representatives of others’, ‘without relying on the courts to save us from ourselves’ (Tushnet 1999: 181, 174). As Tushnet only deals with American constitutional law, the main target of his critique is the vigorous, indeed activist, judicial review of legislation practised in the United States, or what is known as ‘judicial supremacy’ – the idea that the final and authoritative interpreter of the constitution is the United States Supreme Court. Others have made similar claims in a more conceptual and less context-specific way. Most prominently, legal philosopher Jeremy Waldron argued that judicial review is democratically illegitimate and that, in a reasonably well-functioning democracy, there is no reason to suppose that rights are better protected by courts than by legislatures (Waldron 2006: 1353).

The term ‘populist constitutionalism’ was, in this context, rather short-lived. It was abandoned by the mid-2000s, as American scholars opted for the term ‘popular constitutionalism’ to describe roughly the same critical constitutional thinking. In a seminal contribution, Larry Kramer defined popular constitutionalism as ‘the active sovereignty of the people over the Constitution’, an attitude that assigns ‘ordinary citizens a central and pivotal role in implementing their Constitution’ (Kramer 2004: 8). Or, as Mark Tushnet, who endorsed the term, put it, popular constitutionalism is ‘the deployment of constitutional arguments by the people themselves, independent of, and sometimes in acknowledged conflict with, constitutional interpretations offered and enforced by the courts’ (Tushnet 2006: 991). Popular constitutionalism understands the constitution as a distinctive, political kind of law. Whereas ordinary law is ‘law enacted by the government to regulate and restrain the people’, the constitution is considered as ‘law created by the people to regulate and restrain the government’ (Kramer 2004: 29). Hence, while government officials and ultimately the courts are the authoritative interpreters of ordinary law, it is mainly the people’s duty to interpret and enforce the consti-

tution. The people do so by employing what Kramer calls ‘political-legal’ devices (Kramer 2004: 108). These can take various forms. The people may act directly, exercising their rights to vote, petition or assembly; indirectly, through their elected representatives; or even through the courts. Popular constitutionalism is not incompatible with judicial review of legislation as long as the courts act as agents of the people, which means that they may only refuse to enforce a law when its unconstitutionality is ‘clear beyond dispute’ (Kramer 2004: 98–99).

Popular constitutionalism rests on a strong notion of popular sovereignty. For popular constitutionalists, the people are not limited to act as the constituent power (only to virtually disappear thereafter) but they actively preserve their sovereignty by shaping, through the course of ordinary politics, the way the constituted powers interpret the constitution. However, the depoliticization and professionalization of constitutional interpretation promoted by the constitutional orthodoxy – legal constitutionalism or, in the American jargon, judicial supremacy – meant that constitutional law gradually lost its distinctiveness as a special kind of popular law and came to be dominated by legal professionals and, ultimately, by the courts. Whereas, for popular constitutionalism, judicial review of legislation is mainly ‘a device to protect the people from their governors’, the constitutional orthodoxy views it ‘first and foremost as a means of guarding the Constitution from the people’ (Kramer 2004: 132). But then, ‘a lawyerly elite’ is in charge of the constitution rather than the people (Kramer 2004: 228). In popular constitutionalism’s anti-elitism and praise of the political energy of ordinary people manifests itself a genuinely populist sensibility (Corso 2014: 444).

At around the same time, scholars from the United Kingdom (and other Commonwealth countries) developed their own critique of the emerging constitutional orthodoxy of legal constitutionalism. The main idea behind it is that checks on government should be political rather than legal, and should be realized in parliament by the people’s representatives rather than in courtrooms by judges. Political scientist Richard Bellamy offered the most radical advocacy of what came to be known as ‘political constitutionalism’. Bellamy questions common perceptions about courts as essential safeguards against ‘a largely mythical tyranny of the majority’, and cautions that judicial review of majoritarian decision making risks ‘entrenching the privileges of dominant minorities and the domination of unprivileged ones’ (Bellamy 2007: vii). He is well aware that the global trend is in the opposite direction, towards American-style judicial review, but insists nevertheless that legal constitutionalism ‘is more likely to be part of the problem – helping corrode the very democratic processes it seeks so inadequately to replace’ (Bellamy 2007: 262–263). Instead, he contends that, in a reasonably well-functioning democracy, democratic decision making is actively promoting, rather than threatening, constitutional values and, hence, rights are better protected through democratic politics than through judicial enforcement (Bellamy 2007: 145).

Political constitutionalism’s critique of legal constitutionalism has much in common with popular constitutionalism. In any case, political constitutionalism, too, shares the same genuinely populist sensibility: more power should be given to ordinary people acting through politics, as opposed to legal elites.

CONCLUSION

More power to the people is also the message that the populist critique of liberal constitutionalism sends and that at least some versions of democratic populism honestly pursue (Tushnet

and Bugarič 2021: ch. 12). There is some common ground, then, between populism's constitutional critique and the critical theories of popular and political constitutionalism. This association between political populism and academic populism indicates a broader correlation.

The academic populism of popular and political constitutionalism calls for the democratization of constitutional law; usually, though not necessarily, it is inspired by a broader radical-democratic vision. But so do also at least those versions of inclusionary and emancipatory left-wing populism, or what we may call progressive populism, that endorse the minimal populist-constitutional critique of liberal democracy without questioning constitutionalism's basic premises. Both popular and political constitutionalism and progressive populism coincide in their anti-elitism, anti-professionalism and anti-legalism; they dismiss the idea that the creation of constitutional meaning is reserved to legal elites acting through formal-legal procedures and contend instead that it is equally a matter for 'ordinary' people acting within 'ordinary' politics and through 'ordinary' legislation. In a well-known quote, Roberto Unger forcefully expresses this kind of critique. Unger identifies as one of the 'dirty little secrets' of contemporary jurisprudence its 'discomfort with democracy' and the 'fear of popular action':

The discomfort with democracy shows up in every area of contemporary legal culture: in the ceaseless identification of restraints upon majority rule, rather than of restraints upon the power of dominant minorities, as the overriding responsibility of judges and jurists; in the consequent hypertrophy of counter-majoritarian practices and arrangements; in the opposition to all the institutional reforms, particularly those designed to heighten the level of popular political engagement, as threats to a regime of rights; in the equation of the rights of property with the rights of dissent; in the effort to obtain from judges, under the cover of improving interpretation, the advances popular politics fail to deliver... Fear and loathing of the people always threatened to become the ruling passions of this legal culture. (Unger 1996: 72–73)

The constitutional attitude of progressive populists seems to be informed – more often, implicitly rather than explicitly – by the kind of radical-democratic aspiration that animates popular and political constitutionalism. The democratizing and transformative potential of progressive populism towards a more inclusive and participatory polity, which promises 'a radical-democratic innovation of constitutionalism' (Blokker 2019b: 125), is especially important in countries with weak civil societies and weak political party systems, where legal constitutionalism is more likely to incite developments that reduce the constitution to an elite instrument (Halmai 2018: 12; more broadly, see Arato and Cohen 2022: ch. 5; Tushnet and Bugarič 2021: ch. 12). And, since such 'failures' of constitutional democracy are exactly the reason for the rise of exclusionary and authoritarian deviations or perversions of the core populist idea, the democratic constitutionalism of progressive populism may actually counter the rise of authoritarian populism. Some amount of 'healthy' populism, then, appears to be necessary to fight 'bad' populism.

Populism's relation to constitutionalism is variable and highly context-specific. Exclusionary and authoritarian forms of populism pose indeed a threat to constitutional democracy; but emancipatory and democratic forms are also possible. The minimum that all populism(s) share is their critique of the prevailing legalistic understanding of liberal constitutionalism and of the processes of depoliticization, anti-majoritarianism and judicial empowerment associated with it. Only this can be properly called 'populist constitutionalism', in the sense of a distinctive, even if only negative and incomplete, understanding of constitutionalism.

The core elements of populist constitutionalism, people-centrism and anti-elitism, entail a critique from *within* liberal democracy. Anything beyond that, which we may call ‘constitutional populism’, the various constitutional discourses and practices of populists, is contingent rather than inherent. Authoritarian populists may even go as far as questioning liberal democracy and, hence, constitutionalism as such, effectively negating even the core elements of populist constitutionalism. When this is the case, when populists slide into authoritarianism, they are hardly populist anymore, in any rigorous understanding of the term, but rather plainly authoritarian. A clearer demarcation between populism (authoritarian or otherwise) and authoritarianism is a task that both populism and constitutional studies have yet to undertake.

NOTES

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2. David Fontana makes a similar distinction between what he calls ‘bundled’ and ‘unbundled populism’, arguing: ‘The antiestablishment part of populism can be empirically and logically unbundled from its authoritarian and xenophobic dimensions’ (Fontana 2018: 1482).
3. As they explain: ‘Some populisms emphasize one theme more than others, other populisms don’t implicate some individual themes, and yet of course all populisms resemble the others – but most also resemble many forms of “ordinary” or non-populist politics’ (Tushnet and Bugarič 2021: 54).
4. I have explored several themes that appear in this and the following sections in Kaidatzis 2022.
5. The term ‘populist constitutionalism’ has often been used, somewhat misleadingly, to broadly describe the constitutional discourses or practices of populists (see e.g. Blokker 2019a: 535–536, 540; Blokker 2019b: 113; Blokker 2019c: 332; Müller 2017: 597–600; Szente 2021: 11–29) interchangeably with the term ‘constitutional populism’ that has also been sporadically used.

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20. History: the moral economy perspective

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INTRODUCTION

At present, history does not appear sufficiently engaged in interdisciplinary conversations surrounding populism – neither as an academic discipline nor as a realm of past experience – to offer insights to the social sciences. This chapter seeks to highlight populism as a topic for historical research and stimulate greater awareness of history as a valuable source of knowledge. It explores historical trajectories and the underlying logic of populism while emphasizing the potential of the ‘moral economy’ approach that historiography has contributed to the broader social sciences. Hitherto, ‘populism’ serves frequently as a pejorative term associated with right-wing movements, whereas moral economy researchers tend to focus on communal action with leftist undercurrents. Bringing the two concepts together highlights ambiguities and the progressive potential of populism, on the one hand, and problematic aspects of agency driven by moral economy, on the other. Synergies between Ernesto Laclau’s theory of populist reason and E. P. Thompson’s moral economy approach may animate the mutual cross-fertilization of populism studies and historical science in future research.

Noteworthy alternatives to our proposal are (a) transhistorical approaches and (b) nominalistic (or conceptual history) perspectives. Transhistorical views facilitate a comprehensive history of populism, which – disregarding historical context – they may trace via the Middle Ages back to antiquity. Discussions about the deficiencies of democracy as a form of government, from Platonic philosophy to our time, would appear, from such a perspective, as a critique of populism. By contrast, the nominalistic approach is highly specific when strictly applied, as the attributes ‘populist’ or ‘populism’ tend to be awarded by others rather than to appear as self-designations. Unless a wider semantic field of popular demands is included, such an approach contributes primarily to a complementary history of speech acts hostile to populism (Frank 2020) and not to a history of the people and movements that are usually classified as populist.

In this contribution, we briefly sketch ways of employing history in the study of populism, followed by a presentation of the moral economy perspective and a chronological overview of populism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries seen from this light. In the concluding discussion, we highlight how a historically informed moral economy approach may enhance our understanding of both the logic and the form of populism, which rather than its contents are considered its key constituents in (post-)Laclauian thought (Vulović and Palonen 2022).

HISTORY IN POPULISM STUDIES

Research on populism frequently cites historical evidence in an illustrational manner. However, despite recent calls for a more global-historical methodology (Tuğal 2021), there has been little systematic reflection on what populism studies can learn from the past, or what

historiography has on offer for understanding populism. This lack of integration results in the disregard of a wealth of historical research and an ‘often historically amnesic’ use of the term populism (Skenderovic 2017: 43). This may be partly due to an outdated view of history in the social sciences and to historians’ avoidance of the concept of populism as a hermeneutic tool – even as they examine populist phenomena (Beigel and Eckert 2017; Finchelstein 2014). Research into contemporary history is no exception (Reitmayer 2021). Such a reluctance limits both the impact of historical knowledge and the scope of populism studies. Arguably, the problem ‘is not that we lack clarity in defining the term, but rather that our theories of populism lack history’ (Finchelstein 2014: 467).

Partial exceptions to the insufficient synthesis of populism studies and history are inquiries into (a) the relation of populism and fascism and (b) the origins of populism. The former is a historicized variant of the inquiry concerning how populism and right-wing extremism intersect (Eatwell 2017; Griffin 1991). It is sometimes equated with the search for an origin (Finchelstein 2014, 2017). The latter strand might also draw on conceptual history or concern the history of democratic legitimacy, suggesting that the modern idea of popular sovereignty has continuously fuelled populist mobilization (Kelly 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017).

Transcending such specific research questions, three overlapping contributions of historical research to the field of populism studies may be put forward in the form of an as yet scarcely realized potential. First, drawing on an idiographic methodology, individual historical studies may offer ‘thick descriptions’ and the inclusion of conjunctural evidence in the examination of particular cases of populism. Through hindsight they enhance our knowledge of the social, cultural, economic and political dynamics of populism. The resulting detailed and contextually saturated knowledge may help improve definitions and theoretical ways of addressing populism, and falsify premature conclusions based on current cases alone. It also opens the road to micro studies of populist phenomena that may prove useful in illuminating a range of research questions (e.g. James 1988; Joyce 1991; Postel 2007; Venturi 1960 [1952]).

Second, historical research may broaden and deepen our understanding of populism, and help reject simplifying generalizations by aggregating a significant number of cases and variants (large *n*). Historical insight may thus help sharpen definitions and theoretical approaches of populism at an appropriate level of generality, highlighting characteristic functional aspects over time or demonstrating ‘family resemblances’ (Canovan 1981). A ‘longue durée’ perspective spanning the modern era or even stretching as far back as the ancient world views populism as a variegated epiphenomenon of political communication that suggests the deceptiveness of any expectation that it might be a passing fad (Beigel and Eckert 2017).

Third, historical studies constitute a useful branch of populism research that unravels genealogies such as the transformation and succession of protagonists, movements and messages. This encompasses processes of mutual learning and the multi-scalar diffusion of populist repertoires, including transcontinental and global connections, ‘translations’ and adaptations (Finchelstein 2017; Tuğal 2021). A genealogical perspective appears to be inconsistent with the observation that the past has seen a range of ‘populist moments’ rather than marked continua and that populism tends to come in waves. However, the intermittent appearance of populism is primarily a European phenomenon while greater persistence prevails in the United States (US) (Priester 2007) and Latin America. In fact, the research cycles that mirror boom periods of populism come along with a superficial academic event orientation (and corresponding shallow theorizing) that impedes the understanding of structural factors and linkages that connect dispersed peaks of populism.

In addition to such basic features, historical research offers another, as yet untapped, resource that incorporates the above contributions to populism studies, focusing on the concept of ‘moral economy’. This concept is established as a tool to explain popular agency in times of social and political upheaval, revealing the rationality and pattern behind apparently spasmodic and unreasonable rioting. It is congenial to the antagonisms, demands and significations of populism, and expands on approaches that conceive the history of populism as a history of popular uprisings, seeking to uncover their underlying articulatory logics (Laclau 2005; Möller 2020).

A MORAL ECONOMY APPROACH

In the 1960s, British maverick historian E. P. Thompson began to frame the concept of ‘moral economy’ when addressing food riots in eighteenth-century Britain (1963, 1971, 1991). His intervention had a critical impact on histories of food riots more broadly, on ethnographies of modernization conflicts around the globe and on the social research of topics that range from social unrest to welfare state arrangements and the management of the commons.

Thompson distinguished two types of riots, the first aroused by manipulators of the crowd and the second resulting from the crowd’s genuine self-help. He tied the latter variant to customary notions of a moral economy, that is, to a social bargain by which the establishment garnered loyalty in exchange for minding the poor’s subsistence (Thompson 1963). This paternalistic set-up stabilized the social order by ensuring the affordable provision of basic goods to the populace even in times of scarcity. It was undergirded by two interrelated models of moral economy – that of the elites and that of the crowd. Whereas a top-down vision affirmed values of order, the one based on popular consensus and a popular ethic justified rioting and disciplined coercive action when the sustenance of the poor ceased to function in compliance with their accustomed entitlements. The core of this moral economy was a political rationality based on notions of the public good (Thompson 1971).

A ‘moral economy’ perspective made sense of riots that previous research had regarded as a chaotic phenomenon. Three aspects in Thompson’s interpretation are especially noteworthy in view of the affinity between moral economy and populism: the affective dimension, parochialism and aggrieved groups. Thompson emphasized that as much as from actual deprivation, riots resulted from outrage over perceived illegitimate commercial practices and disregard of entitlements. Emotions aroused by existential threats, claims upon the authorities under such circumstances and outrage over crisis profiteers gave a moral charge to protest that set the moral economy apart (Thompson 1991). Moreover, moral economies were based on distinctly local presumptions. They were activated in times of hardship and tended to thwart the trade of food, including to neighbouring and more distressed areas (Thompson 1971). Finally, the moral economy was a deal between higher and lower ranks of society at the expense of the rising middle classes, especially at that of profiteering food dealers among religious minorities (Thompson 1991).

Thompson used the terms ‘populist’ and ‘populism’ in passing, although in inverted commas. With this, he referred to the radical movement in Britain in the early nineteenth century. This movement, he asserted, was dominated by the working class with ‘an advanced democratic “populism” as its theory’ (Thompson 1963: 808). Apparently, these populists were heirs of Thompson’s protagonists of the moral economy in the eighteenth century. As a matter

of fact, the expression ‘moral economy’ appears occasionally in Chartist and Owenite documents in the first half of the nineteenth century (Götz 2015).

Thompson’s scholarship or the concept of ‘moral economy’ are rarely mentioned in literature on populism. However, a few academics have drawn connections while framing populism as a defence of moral economy (Lasch 1991), suggesting that the eighteenth-century crowd embodied the populism of the day (Stavrakakis and Jäger 2018), referring to the proto-populism of the Chartist movement (Stavrakakis forthcoming) or discussing current developments in Asia (Thompson 2016). There are also efforts to merge the theorizing on moral economy and populism based on the work of Thompson and Laclau (Götz and Palonen forthcoming). In fact, Laclau, in his theory on populist reason, suggested pre-industrial food riots to be ‘a good starting point for an approach to populism’ (2005: 76). While this proposition drew on scholarship other than Thompson’s, the moral economy approach offers a prism that provides the historicity, reflexivity and contextuality called for as a necessary ‘thickening’ of the Laclauian perspective that alternative suggestions such as conceptual history would only partly provide (Borriello and Jäger 2021). Thompson’s moral economy argument articulates structural conditions with the logic of populism, both at the vertical and the horizontal levels, which are crucial in Laclau’s theory. The form of populism for Laclau (Palonen 2020) resembles Thompson’s moral economy, where the collective subject emerges from below as ‘us’, the people or the crowd.

At the same time, the moral economy approach can benefit from the Laclauian analysis of the interplay of leadership and the convergence of popular demands in the temporal representation of an ‘us’ (e.g., the people) (Casullo 2019; Palonen 2021). In general, such an exploration of populism can also help transcend both Thompson’s limited focus on the eighteenth century and the normative reductionism that tends to impede moral economy research. The latter often equates the ‘moral’ with the objectively ‘good’ rather than with incommensurate subjectivities or moral justifications, something populism research generally captures more clearly.

The suggested exploration of the moral economies of populism is limited to a specific conjuncture in time and does not assume a transhistorical perspective. Only when the eighteenth-century political economy disentangled the previously coinciding concepts of morality and economy did the composite notion of ‘moral economy’ make sense as a remedy (Götz 2015). Thus, the concept of moral economy offers a middle-range theoretical perspective that singles out the late modern period, from the mid-eighteenth century up until our time. It highlights the tension between communal notions of justice and the disembedded system of economic allocation as the fulcrum of modern populism. It thus avoids a flat economic narrative (e.g. Eichengreen 2018) and what is often criticized as a deterministic conflation of political radicalization and hardships within modernization processes (Betz 1993; Götz 1997; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018; Ulbricht 2020).

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Populism, in this perspective, co-emerged with the notion of a moral economy that gave the English crowd the rationale to confront an expanding market logic. The paternalist moral economic model of the eighteenth century petered out in the nineteenth century, although it was ‘picked up by the early co-operative flour mills, by some Owenite socialists, and it lingered on for years somewhere in the bowels of the Cooperative Wholesale Society’ (Thompson

1971: 136). Despite its afterlife, alternative crowd-based moral economies with new notions of entitlements and justice partly took its place. Nineteenth-century British history has been read as a succession of populist movements with distinct morally underpinned economic agendas. These ranged from early Luddite machine smashing, the Birmingham Political Union and the resultant Reform Bill of 1832, or the Chartist Movement with its People's Charter of 1838 to the dense politicization and oratorical conveyance of popular demands in the Victorian and Edwardian era (Calhoun 1981; Joyce 1991).

The moral economy was also transformed when its ideas travelled with settlers from England to the colonies in North America (Bogin 1988) and elsewhere. Jeffersonian liberalism encompassed a populist appeal and elements of moral economic thought, instilling these into the political culture of the US many decades before the fin-de-siècle rise of the People's Party (Katz 2003; Kuzminski 2008; Larson 1984). Tocqueville's warning of majority despotism reflects the nascent US populism already in the first half of the nineteenth century, although he did not associate this danger with Jefferson and may have underestimated the contemporary presidential populism of Andrew Jackson (Aguilar Rivera 2019). The nativist anti-Catholic, anti-slavery and anti-partisan 'Know Nothing' movement that arose in the 1840s turned from a secret society (hence the name) into the politicking American Party. Its insurgent populism drew on a traditionalist anti-establishment morality that faced unsettling market-driven transformations of its lifeworld. At their peak in the mid-1850s, the Know Nothings celebrated considerable electoral advances that remapped US party politics and fuelled the rise of the Republican Party, into which they rapidly dissolved (Anbinder 1992; Voss-Hubbard 2002). It set the tone for populism as a democratic movement.

France had its own trajectory of moral economy and populism, which arguably culminated in the French Revolution (Gauthier and Ikni 1988; Kaplan 2015; Shibata 1988) and in the rhetoric of Robbespierre (Rousselière 2021). An exploratory study of speeches suggests a decline of populist imagery such as the apotheosis of the people and anti-elitism in the later part of the revolution, with populist topics no longer being raised in a speech by Napoleon Bonaparte (Dudley 2016). However, his nephew Louis Napoleon, a political pamphleteer and putschist, was swept to power in connection with the revolution of 1848 after having run a successful presidential campaign. A coup d'état and two plebiscites made him become the founder of the Second Empire under the name Napoleon III. The 'other Napoleon' innovatively developed a strategic Machiavellianism based on a blend of monistic democratic rhetoric and practice, benevolent economics, illiberal repression and ritualized popular acclaim – the prototype of Caesarism (Rosanvallon 2021; Rosenblatt 2018).

As the French Republic that followed was elitist and unresponsive to concerns of the populace, an oppositional big-tent protest materialized in the late 1880s. This populist movement spearheaded by General Georges Boulanger merged requests for political reform, moral renewal, economic intervention and the social question within a nationalist framework. It innovatively deployed mass propaganda and effectively dominated the public space through its efficient organization and major rallies (Hutton 1976; Winock 2000). While the movement rapidly disintegrated when Boulanger hesitated to seize power and political persecution hit, it was a landmark as a vehicle of disenchanting masses and of a new protest culture. It set a new tone for French politics (Rosanvallon 2021).

Russia's crystallization of a populist ideology has been associated with the year 1848, although, unlike France, the revolutions of that year had few immediate repercussions in the Czarist Empire (Venturi 1960 [1952]). A term corresponding to and usually translated as

populism was invented among socialist intelligentsia who propagated an idealistic countryside settlement following the slogan ‘going to the people’. By 1875 they had coined the neologism *narodnichestvo* to signify an aspired revolution that would correspond both to the interests and to the wishes of the rural populace. The distinction marked a shift of strategy from top-down agitation to a ‘moralistic positivism’ (Scanlan 1984: 219) grounded in the endemic mindscape of the peasants. Abstract ideology gave way to recognition of the moral economy prevailing in the countryside. However, over time, growing numbers of populists (self-acclaimed *narodniki*) began to regard the grassroots approach as insufficient and supplemented it with a terrorist strategy that culminated in the assassination of Czar Alexander II. The populist terminology thus became equivocal. In addition, it was used increasingly loosely in literary contexts (Pipes 1964). Later, a transliteration of the lexeme ‘populism’ also entered the Russian language.

The Latinate term ‘populist’ surfaced first in the US in 1891, preceding the formation of the People’s Party at a convention of mostly Southern and Midwestern farmers’ alliances and labour organizations in the following year. ‘Populist’ was initially introduced as a catchy self-description by the adherents of this movement, but, as used by its opponents, it acquired a negative meaning (Frank 2020; Hicks 1931). The corresponding ism-word was soon added to the vocabulary (Fuentes 2020). This reform movement, which was highly successful in the early 1890s, has been denounced as a channel of anxious provincial resentments, conspiracy phantasies, unruliness and nativism, and as a precursor of the paranoia of the McCarthy era (Hofstadter 1955). However, a large body of research shows populism, instead, as a progressive, civil society-oriented (Jäger 2021) and egalitarian mobilization that was committed to cooperative ideas and aggregated interest group politics (including women’s suffrage). It developed ‘flexible, complex, and carefully reasoned’ programmes covering currency and fiscal issues, farm credit and business regulation (Postel 2019: 8). This movement originated from the moral economic reclaiming of ‘plain people’s’ welfare against the ‘railway kings’ and the Wild West-style predatory capitalism of the so-called Gilded Age. The populists called their organ *The National Economist* and drew on inductive heterodox economics aiming at the extension of popular sovereignty to the economic sphere (Rothstein 2014). Their ambitious goals may explain the fierce resistance they encountered (Goodwyn 1976).

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Turkey is a harbinger of the attraction of populist strategies in countries facing challenges of perceived backwardness or decline with strategies of national renewal in the twentieth century. The term populism (*halkçılık*) was coined in the country in 1914 with reference to the movement that distilled a new Turkish language through standardization of the vernacular spoken by common people. In a 1918 landmark article, ideologist Ziya Gökalp framed populism as a homogenous and inclusive society without class divisions, resembling organic solidarity and avoiding the pitfalls of either capitalism or Bolshevism. Two years later, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk adopted these thoughts about a corporatist third way in the framework of his ‘Populism Programme’. Populism became a foundational concept of the modern Turkish state and one of the six Kemalist ‘arrows’ (principles), which were enshrined in an amendment to the constitution in 1937 (Gürhanlı 2020; Toprak 2014).

There is an issue whether, in its official form, populism-qua-*halkçılık* resembles populism proper (should there be any standard). Irrespective of the initial ‘going to the people’ drive

and the customary translation, bottom-up moral economic notions were lacking in the Turkish appropriation of populism. The latter was rather akin to what certain languages designate as a harmonious ‘people’s community’. In contemporary Germany, *halkçılık* was thus explained as meaning *Volksgemeinschaft* (i.e. people’s community, see Kral 1939) and later theorists have questioned whether Kemalist discourse qualifies for the populist record (Laclau 2005: 208). Moreover, problems of universal applicability of the concept are illustrated by the existence of an alternative Turkish word for populism. Ironically, the etymologically Arabian *halkçılık* is associated with a secular centre-left modernization, driven by military and civil Kemalist officials. By contrast, in the second half of the twentieth century the Western loanword *popülizm* – in a largely pejorative sense – came to signify an oppositional popular approach (Balçı 2021; Gürhanlı 2020). The latter is rooted in religion and a conservative outlook as well as on patron–client relationships (Sunar 1990), thus embodying an ostensibly problematic moral economic pattern.

The interwar years and the Second World War have gone to history as the era of fascism and authoritarianism, less so of populism. However, many researchers agree that populist logic was a constituent of fascism (Griffin 1991). Whether such a judgement would accommodate a moral economic point of view is debatable, as the notion of people’s community illustrates. This was a widely shared societal ideal at the time, enthusiastically embraced by – and nowadays primarily identified with – national socialism. On the one hand, the concept of people’s community incorporates a general notion of reciprocity and justice, and the fascist regimes at the time zealously sought not only to stage the dignity of labour, but also to satisfy basic subsistence expectations of their populace as an expression of this idea (whether drawing on domestic resources or on those of countries they plundered). On the other hand, the discourse on people’s community was organicist, incorporating the elite while – in its Nazi guise – excluding biological or ideological aliens, and it rarely took bottom-up demands of the crowd into account (Götz 2001). The assertion that the people’s community was a ‘markedly populist project’ (Münkler 2012: 52) is thus revealed as a doubtful cliché.

There is a more trenchant example of interwar populism. In Eastern Central Europe, under the impact of capitalism, feudal social contracts had collapsed in the century preceding the First World War. Landlords broke free from traditional obligations and emerged as the principal beneficiaries of the abolition of serfdom. Given the development gap in relation to Western Europe, the radical smallholder ideology that emerged was the economically rational answer to the resulting difficulties (Georgescu-Roegen 1960). Analytical accounts use the concepts of populism, peasantism and agrarianism interchangeably to describe this original political approach (Jackson 1974). The contemporary vocabulary itself illustrates further ambiguities, from which divergent historical narratives may emerge (Buzogány and Varga 2018; Palonen forthcoming).

People and folk orientation, together with cooperative ideas and plebeian radicalism, in varying measures, were present in East Central European agrarian mobilizations. The mass movements and parties that emerged throughout the region were influenced by the *narodnik* tradition, which they assimilated in distinct forms to fit a more bottom-up reformist framework, seeking a third way – even in geopolitical terms – between Bolshevism and capitalism. Romantic overtones of their visions such as a cooperative ‘Garden Hungary’ and calls for cultural and political acknowledgement (including franchise and self-government) went in par with radical demands for land reform and socialization of the agrarian sector in favour of the rural populace. While populists integrated popular demands in still largely rural societies,

their perspective was on occasion clouded by resentments against minorities who appeared to dominate other sectors (Canovan 1981; Gollwitzer 1977; Taylor 2020; Trencsényi 2014).

Populist movements, despite their majoritarian potential based on the countryside population, acted by and large as opposition forces. However, the radical agrarian government of Aleksandar Stamboliyski in Bulgaria in 1919–1923, the first populist regime that came into power in the twentieth century, is frequently overlooked. Right-wing authoritarian coups in the interwar years, the ravages of the Second World War and communist regime changes after 1945 marginalized and later largely eradicated this tradition. At the same time, populism re-emerged in Western Europe. As early as in the 1950s, Poujadist tax protests rose in France. By the 1970s, anti-tax parties had entered the parliaments in Denmark and Norway, contributing to the global rise of neoliberalism (Palonen and Sunnercrantz 2021; Winock 1997).

In Latin America, populism is traceable to the beginning of the twentieth century, and from the mid-1920s the term appeared occasionally in the Cuban press (Fuentes 2020). However, the charismatic General Juan Perón's ascent to power in the 1946 Argentine presidential elections epitomizes the Latin American tradition and 'classical populism' (de la Torre 2017). This tradition is based on popular identification with an antagonizing strongman who bears resemblance with the region's nineteenth-century warlord (*caudillo*), and whose name stands in for an anti-elitist political agenda and -ism. Perón's leadership was powerfully amplified by a strongwoman partner – Ev(it)a Perón. Peronism built on the evocation of the 'shirtless' plebs (*descamisados*), a constituency that Juan Perón had co-opted as a game-changing secretary of labour while serving in a right-wing military junta. Under Perón's presidency, the couple extended the suffrage and continued to nourish and patronize the labour union clientele. Their aesthetic staging of inclusion and acclamation, culminating in Eva's messianic rituals of kissing the poor and sick, was iconic and transcended ingrained racial boundaries (Chamosa 2010; Horowitz 1999).

The Perón regime drew on sustained top-down mobilizing against bourgeois hegemony and against the meddling of foreign interests as well as on repressing independent sectors of society. At the same time, its antagonistic confrontation broke crisis-affected oligarchic patterns of domination, infused society with an egalitarian vision and drew on support gathered through the negotiation of unresolved social demands by marginal groups (Burbano de Lara 2019; James 1988). After his wife's death and the 1955 military coup, Perón remained crucial as an exiled oracle and incarnation of popular aspirations up until his brief return in 1973. Peronism remains a significant force in Argentine politics today.

The tradition of populism is especially strong in Latin America, frequently with overtones of subaltern voices and resistance against white hegemony. At the same time, the post-Second World War era saw the emergence of populist tendencies and regimes across the globe. Indira Gandhi's authoritarian variant is merely the 'most well-known of India's many experiences with populism', some of which are regarded as having enhanced democracy (Subramanian 2007: 85). The Indian populist tradition also inspired the broad academic conceptualization of subalternity, which intersects with moral economy approaches in the Global South (Brass 1991; Siméant 2015).

CONCLUSION

The history of populism is contingent on preconceptions of what is populist, a volatile quality for which contradictory views exist. There are good reasons for the proposition that ‘there is no easy way out of the confusion, but a modest step towards some type of clarity would be to ground the concept of populism on a firm historical foundation’ (Postel 2019: 11). The historical dimension benefits all approaches to populism, as this chapter’s problematization and outline have sought to show. In addition, we propose particularly to undergird the formal theory of Laclau, which understands populism as a discursive logic, with a moral economy praxeology in the research tradition established by Thompson. As our historical overview has shown, such a synergistic approach, combining political theory and historical sociology, does not eliminate all uncertainties surrounding populism. However, it does register the ambiguities of the latter’s logic within a framework that reduces the complexity and vagueness of ‘populism’ plaguing academic discourse in a rather productive way. This approach situates the logic of populism in relation to patterns of moral economy, highlighting existential demands for social justice that forcefully contend for articulation in response to a disembedded economic rationality. Key to such a distinctly modern explanation of populism are perceptions of entitlement, responsiveness and legitimate domination. We thus propose populism to be a logic based on ‘thick’ structural preconditions, partly in contrast to ‘thin-centred’ approaches.

The tension between empirical historical cases of populism, on the one hand, and ideals of popular moral economic logic, on the other, are evident. Perhaps the greatest challenge for a moral economic understanding of populism is the problem addressed by Thompson in passing, namely the distinction between the authenticity and manipulation of crowd demands. Only popular demands that draw on common sense and aspire intersubjective validity adequately reflect a moral economy. They emerge from the bottom up as they do in Laclau’s theorizing of the integration of divergent grievances that – through populist slogans or leadership – are articulated into popular demands confronting those who impede their satisfaction.

For the historical analyst and the political actor alike the ideal types of demands or ‘manipulation’ present a conundrum, when considering strategic aspects or weighing whether ‘the prevailing logic runs downward or upward’ (Burbano de Lara 2019: 447). The dilemma is all the more salient as the moral economic logic of populists seeks to take advantage of affective outrage, is often characterized by a parochial horizon and may lack a proper consideration of third parties. As a political logic and as a subject of historical analysis, the greatest issue surrounding populism is who inspires and channels its outrage, and to which ends. Historical research is increasingly called to engage with the broader strands of populism research in order to help overcome the prevalent simplifications of what populism is, and to better map the ways in which populism has realized its potential of diminishing societal disparities while being observant of so-called external effects. In our time, overcoming its own limitations and expanding its historically derived moral economic vision in a global age of climate crisis, populism might transcend itself to become a constructive force in world politics. The rich history of populism provides insights that may be crucial for this transformation.

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21. Discourse studies

Ruth Wodak

INTRODUCTION: THE MICRO POLITICS OF FAR-RIGHT POPULISM

Right at the beginning of this chapter, I would like to (re-)emphasize the statement of sociologist and media expert Dick Pels (2012: 31ff.) that it would be dangerous to regard modern populism as a void of serious content or to reduce ‘right-wing populism’ to a ‘frivolity of form, pose and style’ and thus downplay its outreach, its messages and resonance. Indeed, it would be ‘erroneous to think there is no substance behind its political style... It is precisely through its dynamic mix of substance and style that populist politics has gained an electoral lead position in current media democracy’ (2012: 32; see also Wodak 2021: 7ff.). Thus, when analysing far-right (or indeed left-wing) populist movements and parties, it is essential to recognize that their agenda – realized as it is in many genres, performance, rhetoric and discourse across relevant social domains – *always combines and integrates form and content*, targets specific audiences and adapts to specific contexts. Only by doing so are we able to deconstruct, understand and explain their messages, the resonance of their messages and their electoral success (and failure), i.e. the *micro politics of far-right populism* – as will be illustrated below.

In the following, I will first discuss relevant approaches to (critical) discourse studies ([C] DS) and – subsequently – to their analysis of far-right/radical right populist text, talk and image. I will then present the most important dimensions of far-right populist ideologies, of related discursive strategies, rhetorical tropes, pragmatic devices and argumentation schemes employed to express and realize both *form and content* of such rhetoric, always in respect to specific genres, performative dimensions and semiotic affordances. To a substantial extent, these strategies contribute to the success of far-right/radical right populism.¹

DISCOURSE STUDIES AND CRITICAL DISCOURSE STUDIES: DISCOURSE, GENRE AND TEXT

DS is a heterogeneous field involving scholars from a range of disciplines (e.g. Angermüller et al. 2014; Krippendorff and Halabi 2020). DS has not only been a source of methodological innovation but has also crucially inspired theoretical debates in the social sciences and humanities. However, a gap sometimes exists between the more epistemological and political interests of discourse theorists and the methodological focus of discourse analysts, most notably in Europe (Rheindorf 2019; Wodak 2019b, 2019c). Even if the emphasis is sometimes placed more on theory and sometimes more on detailed empirical analysis, DS only exists as a field when *both* discourse theory and discourse analysis are integrated in the practice of discourse research.

Much DS research draws on Jürgen Habermas’ and Michel Foucault’s theories. Habermas emphasized language/communicative competence as the most decisive characteristic of

humankind. Discourse is regarded as an argumentative dialogue in which the veracity of claims and the legitimacy of norms are negotiated (Susen 2018: 43). By contrast, Foucault analysed structures and regimes of knowledge, with a particular focus on the role of power therein. In the Foucaultian conception, discourse is a linguistically produced system of meaning that is based on specific power structures and interests while at the same time producing said structures and interests (Keller 2018). Moreover, the *sociology of knowledge approach* to discourse analysis (*Wissenschafts-soziologische Diskursanalyse*; see Keller 2020) united several foundations of phenomenologically oriented theories of knowledge with the assumptions of Foucault, through which he aimed to examine social practices and the communicative processes by which *symbolic orders* (and their consequences) are constructed, transformed and stabilized.

Discourse theory plays an important role for this chapter: Ernesto Laclau (2005a) developed political *discourse theory* (e.g. Kølvråa 2018) alongside the theory of hegemony (building on the work of Antonio Gramsci) and the concept of radical democracy (developed together with Chantal Mouffe). Proceeding from the general question of the structure of *discursive formations*, Laclau attempted to locate those cultural techniques that are responsible for the so-called ‘equivalence’ of complex political systems. In contrast to *discourse theory* as launched by the Essex School, the various theories and methodologies subsumed under DS are concerned with a much more detailed, linguistically systematic analysis of text, talk and images related to context, methodology and a theoretical approach to ‘discourse’. As David Howarth and Yannis Stavrakakis (2000: 5) maintain, discourse theory ‘thus offers novel ways to think about the relationship between social structures and political agency, the role of interests and identities in explaining social action, the interweaving of meanings and practices, and the character of social and historical change’. Although Ernesto Laclau has also stated that the focus should shift from the contents of populism – what are the concrete demands formulated by populist agents, what is their ideology – to how populists formulate ‘those contents – whatever those contents are’ (Laclau 2005b: 33), detailed textual and multi-modal analyses remain relatively scarce.

CRITICAL DISCOURSE STUDIES AND THE POPULIST FAR RIGHT

The significant difference between DS and CDS lies in the latter’s constitutive *problem-oriented* and interdisciplinary approach. CDS does not study a linguistic unit *per se* (such as sentence structure, metaphors, pronouns and so forth) but rather social phenomena (such as populism) that are complex and thus require an inter-, or transdisciplinary and multi-method approach (Catalano and Waugh 2020). Any social phenomenon lends itself to critical investigation, to be challenged and not to be taken for granted. CDS comprises several approaches, distinguished among other things by their underlying theoretical positions, their definition of discourse, the selection of research objects as well as the methodologies and methods used for analysis (e.g., Forchtner and Wodak 2018; Wodak and Meyer 2016 for details).

All approaches in CDS differ from DS in some crucial respects:

- CDS aims to empirically and theoretically grasp the dialectical relationship between discourse and society; this leads to an *abductive approach*, whereas other approaches such as corpus linguistics or conversation analysis claim to be purely inductive.
- In CDS, context is categorized and analysed systematically, whereas many other DS approaches neglect socio-political factors that influence meaning making.
- In CDS, understanding, interpretation and explanation are always regarded as a ‘hermeneutic circle’ in the sense of ‘the method of grasping and interpreting meanings’ (e.g. Wodak and Meyer 2016: 22).

Many detailed in-depth studies exist which employ CDS in investigating far-right and left-wing populist rhetoric, argumentation strategies and forms of legitimation as well as provocation and scandalization. While drawing on multiple qualitative and quantitative, comparative and interdisciplinary studies of far-right populist agenda and rhetoric, their party manifestos as well as campaign materials and their provocative agenda setting in the media,² it is possible to distil *four ideological dimensions* which are realized in context-dependent ways (e.g. Wodak 2021: 32–35):

- *Appeals to nationalism, nativist nationalism or anti-pluralism*: Far-right populist parties identify a seemingly homogenous ethnos, a *populum* (community, or *Volk*), which is arbitrarily defined, often in nativist (blood-related) terms. Such parties value the homeland, or *Heimat* (or heartland, if an internal distinction within the nation is made), which requires protection from dangerous interlopers.
- *Appeals to anti-elitism*: Such parties share an anti-intellectual attitude – an ‘arrogance of ignorance’ – which at least in Europe is associated with strong European Union (EU) scepticism. According to these parties, democracy should essentially be reduced to the majoritarian principle inside the nation, meaning the rule of an (arbitrarily defined) people.
- *Appeals to authoritarianism*: A saviour is elevated and worshipped, alternating between the roles of Robin Hood and ‘strict father’, the repository of paternalistic values. Such seemingly charismatic (and media-savvy) leaders require a hierarchically structured party and authoritarian structures to guarantee what they see as law and order and security.
- *Appeals to historical mythologizing and conservative values*: Far-right populist parties represent traditional, conservative values, and insist on preserving the status quo or promise a return to the ‘good old days’. Historical revisionism transforms past suffering or defeat into stories of the people’s success or into stories of betrayal and treachery by others.

Below, I refer to some relevant examples of research when pointing to, and highlighting, salient discursive patterns, and strategies as well as argumentation schemes.

THE DISCOURSE-HISTORICAL APPROACH

The discourse-historical approach (DHA) is widely applied in research on organizational identities, national identity politics, populism, discriminatory rhetoric and so forth, and allows the systematic relating of macro and mezzo levels of contextualization to the micro-level analyses of texts. Such analyses consist primarily of two levels, an *entry-level analysis* focusing on

the thematic dimension of texts, and an *in-depth analysis* that deconstructs the coherence and cohesion of texts in detail. The general aim of the entry-level thematic analysis is to map out the contents of the texts being analysed. The in-depth analysis, on the other hand, is informed by the research questions and consists of the identification of the *genre* (e.g. television interview, policy paper, election poster, political speech or homepage) and an analysis of the *macro structure* of the respective text, the strategies of identity construction, the argumentation schemes and any other means of linguistic realization used therein.

Apart from the concept of *discourse* as we have defined it with Martin Reisigl, *intertextuality* refers to the linkage of all texts to other texts, both in the past and in the present (Reisigl and Wodak 2016: 27). Moreover, the concept of *recontextualization* analyses the trajectories and dynamics of discourses. By taking an argument, a topic, a genre or a discursive practice out of context and restating/realizing it in a new context, we first observe the process of decontextualization and then, when the respective element is implemented in a new context, of recontextualization. The element then acquires a new meaning because meanings are formed in use. Conceptually, the empirical event under investigation is viewed as a phenomenon that has discursive manifestations across *four heuristic levels of context* (Wodak 2011):

- the immediate text of the communicative event in question;
- the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between utterances, texts, genres and discourses;
- the extra linguistic variables and institutional frames of a specific ‘context of situation’; and
- the broader socio-political and historical context in which discursive practices are embedded.

Context can reach from a particular conversational situation to mediatization via traditional or new (social) media, over shorter or longer time frames and lesser or greater distances between socio-political and historical constellations. Questions of *representation* are frequently analysed, in other words, how different groups or individuals are represented through linguistic and/or semiotic means, included or excluded in specific collectives:

- Are people represented as individuals or collectives, with names, functions and/or origins?
- Are people characterized by reference to their age, gender, education, etc.?
- Are actions represented with or without actors?
- Which actors are represented, and which are ‘erased’, deleted?
- Are the recipients of the actions named?
- Are dynamic actions perhaps represented as static, essentialized conditions?

To discursively examine identities (local, national, individual, collective, etc.), all of which are subject to processes of inclusion and exclusion, the DHA focuses on the deconstruction of discursive strategies (Wodak and Rheindorf 2022). In this case, the term ‘strategy’ refers to the conscious or unconscious planning of a text, dependent on context, interest, function, genre, etc. *Strategies of nomination* (how events/objects/persons are referred to) and *predication* (what characteristics are attributed to them) are part and parcel of identity politics. A paradigmatic case might be the naming of a protagonist or an institution metonymically (*pars pro toto*), for example, Merkel for Germany, or as a synecdoche (*totum pro pars*), for example, the

EU for all individual EU organizations. The strategy of *perspectivization* realizes the author's involvement, for example, via *deixis*, quotation marks, metaphors and so forth.

A thorough DHA ideally follows an eight-stage programme, with the eight steps being implemented recursively (Reisigl and Wodak 2016):

- Activation and consultation of preceding theoretical knowledge.
- Systematic collection of data and context information (depending on the research question).
- Selection and preparation of data for the specific analyses.
- Specification of the research question(s) and formulation of assumptions.
- Qualitative pilot analysis, including a context analysis, macro analysis and micro analysis.
- Detailed case studies (primarily qualitative, but in part also quantitative).
- Formulation of critique (detailed interpretation of results).
- Practical application of analytical results.

In summary, the DHA focuses on ways in which power-dependent semiotic means are used to construct positive self- and negative other-presentations ('Us' and 'Them', the good people and the 'others'). This also allows for a foregrounding of specific events in the flow of a narrative as well as increased opportunities to convey messages through opening space for *calculated ambivalence*. Finally, the power of discourse creates regimes of 'normality', that is, what is deemed 'normal', for example about political messages circulating during the so-called refugee crisis in 2014–2016 and the respective heated debates.

MANICHEAN DEMAGOGY

Far-right populist parties seem to offer simple and clear-cut answers to all the fears and challenges mentioned above, by constructing scapegoats and enemies – 'others' who are to blame for our current woes. This is achieved by frequently tapping into traditional collective stereotypes and images of the alleged enemy. The definition of 'the other' varies pursuant to nationally specific conditions. In Hungary, the targets include Roma and Jewish minorities, while Donald Trump in the United States focused on Mexicans, Muslims and immigrants from Latin America. For example, Trump's rhetoric and argumentative schemata to legitimize the building of *the wall* (on the border between the United States and Mexico) have been analysed succinctly by myself (Wodak 2020) and Massimiliano Demata (2023). Important divides within a society, such as class, caste, religion, gender and so forth, are neglected in focusing on such 'others', or are interpreted as the result of 'elitist conspiracies' (Demata et al. 2022; Mondon and Winter 2021). The discursive strategies of 'victim–perpetrator reversal', 'scapegoating' and the 'construction of conspiracy theories' therefore belong to the necessary toolkit of far-right populist rhetoric.

For instance, following an aggressive campaign mode frequently entails the use of *ad hominem* arguments as well as other fallacies such as the straw man or the hasty generalization fallacies (an intentionally deceptive argument). Politicians tend to deny and justify even obvious failures (euphemistically labelled 'mistakes') and quickly find somebody else to blame while cleverly employing manifold strategies of blame avoidance (Hansson 2015); under much pressure, ambiguous, evasive and insincere apologies may be made; or no apologies are given at all (see Figure 21.1, which maps 'Us' and 'Them' in the far-right populist

mindset). In short, anybody can potentially be constructed as a dangerous ‘other’, should this become expedient for specific strategic and manipulative purposes.



Source: Adapted from Wodak 2021: 9.

Figure 21.1 *The far-right populist mindset*

The specific *mediatization* of far-right populist propaganda has been labelled as the *perpetuum mobile of far-right populism* (Wodak 2021: 25–26). Other studies have focused on the fallacious argumentation, the insults and impoliteness and the uncivility of such propaganda (Krzyzanowski and Ledin 2017; Lehner and Wodak 2020; Wodak et al. 2020). Kurt Sengul (2022) has offered insightful studies of Australian far-right rhetoric, specifically of Polly Hanson, and how her communication strategies have become normalized in the Australian political mainstream.

CONSPIRACIES AND UNREAL SCENARIOS

Conspiracy theories draw on the traditional antisemitic *world conspiracy* stereotype that also characterized Nazi and fascist ideologies (McIntosh 2022). As a simple narrative with a simple plot, conspiracy theories help to simplify complex issues and to provide clearly separated Manichean divisions of the ‘innocent’ and of those to ‘blame’. In doing so, they fulfil a strategic political function (Richardson and Wodak 2022: 417).

For example, Hungarian prime minister Victor Orbán published a list of 200 so-called Soros mercenaries³ (including scholars, journalists, intellectuals and non-governmental organizations who are trying to help refugees in Hungary) that allegedly support the Hungarian American philanthropist, who is Jewish. Indeed, Soros⁴ has been demonized via traditional antisemitic

conspiracy stereotypes in all Visegrad countries in Europe (i.e. Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland) and even further afield (Wodak 2021: 139–141). Moreover, research of QAnon conspiracy narratives illustrates that such narratives instrumentalize a sense of *looming crises* that are threatening ‘the people’ and thus lead to ever more anxiety and fear (McIntosh 2022).

Indeed, the antisemitic stereotype of the ‘Jewish capitalist’ is closely related to three other antisemitic stereotypes: the ‘anti-national’, the ‘intellectual Jew’ and the ‘Jewish Bolshevik’. With such *systematic conspiracies*, ‘a single conspiratorial entity carries out a wide variety of activities with the aim of taking control of a country, a region, or even the world’ (Evans 2020: 4). A second type of conspiracy theory is the *event conspiracy*, in which a particular group is believed to have been responsible for (or the ultimate beneficiary of) a single event, such as the JFK conspiracy or the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As Richard Evans (2020) points out, ‘conspiracies imagined in this case are usually short-term’ and relatively self-contained. However, the two variants are also linked, in that ‘an event conspiracy may be thought of as one expression of a systematic conspiracy’ (2020; see also Richardson and Wodak 2022: 397–398). Orbán also launched anti-EU campaigns in 2018 and 2019, choosing to depict the then president of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker with Soros (see ‘anti-Brussels’ posters in Richardson and Wodak 2022: 414; Wodak 2021: 7).⁵

Next to images of Soros and Juncker – significantly, both are shown laughing – is the slogan: ‘You have a right to know what Brussels is preparing to do!’. Interestingly, the posters also include two captions, showing the names of Soros and Juncker. Slogans on the posters viciously attack EU and Brussels institutions (for the detailed multi-modal analysis which is briefly summarized in the following, see Richardson and Wodak 2022: 415–416).

Why, then – one could ask – does Soros feature at all? Here, two factors are salient: first, the political issues addressed by the poster are migration and Hungarian border rights. Orbán has repeatedly argued that Soros is plotting to destroy Hungary, and the rest of ‘Christian Europe’, through an alleged mass immigration. The campaign against the imagined ‘Soros Plan’ not only tied Soros and (illegal) immigration together, it also pushed the specific lie that Soros plots to remove borders entirely, so encouraging unconstrained migration, particularly from Muslim countries to the East. Hence, Orbán can recontextualize that recent campaign, and its specific claims regarding the existential threat that non-Christian refugees represent to Hungary, into a wider campaign against the EU: thus, the ‘They’ used in the poster refers to the EU, Brussels, Juncker and Soros, seemingly united in these aims. Second, Soros is positioned behind Juncker. To say that someone is ‘behind’ someone, or something, is to claim that they are in charge, or somehow controlling and manipulating, the people or phenomena that we can see. In this way, Orbán constructs an ever wider link to his ‘world conspiracy’ theme; he accuses Soros of not only having manipulated Hungary, but also of manipulating EU institutions.

THE USE OF EUPHEMISMS

Euphemisms are frequently used in media reporting with the aim of making restrictive new migration policies acceptable for the mainstream: in January 2019, for example, the suggestion by the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) minister of interior affairs, Herbert Kickl, to change the term ‘reception centre’ for asylum seekers and refugees (*Aufnahmezentrum*) to ‘departure centre’ (*Ausreisezentrum*) scandalized the Austrian public.⁶ This label implied that the safe

haven, the space where refugees would finally not have to fear for their lives, was not a place to stay but – by definition – a place from where one should leave. This might seem quite absurd at first; however, in the context of ever more restrictive migration policies and the explicitly racist rhetoric of exclusion against so-called illegal migrants, this label indicated that asylum seekers were *not* welcome at all; indeed, that they should immediately leave again. Obviously, this is a cleverly chosen, indirect euphemism, insinuating the concept *Abschiebezentrum* (deportation centre), which would have presumably been unacceptable.

‘Departure centre’, one could argue, actually represents a euphemism for ‘deportation centre’. And it would be possible to speculate even further that such labels are intertextually related to the many euphemisms listed by Victor Klemperer (2013) when describing the neologisms and euphemisms created in Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 1940s.

DIGITAL POPULISM

Far-right populist actors frequently attempt to delegitimize media that does not report favourably on them, alleging that they collude with or are part of ‘the corrupt elite’. Although Trump, for example, may be credited with popularizing the term ‘fake news’ to this end, he was certainly not the first politician to use the term (Kellner 2017). Online and social media have been instrumental for many populists as they bypass established media and attempt to construct the specific immediacy between populist actors and ‘the people’ that enables strong identification (Rheindorf 2020: 627).

Trump’s victory on 7 November 2016 is believed to stem – at least partly – from his unconventional, aggressive and offensive use of social media, specifically tweets: Trump did not have to rely on media reporting and serious journalism – he was his own journalist. In their in-depth study, ‘How Trump Reshaped the Presidency in over 11,000 Tweets’, *New York Times* journalist Michael Shear and his colleagues (Shear et al. 2019) demonstrate that Trump ‘fully integrated Twitter into the very fabric of his administration, reshaping the nature of the presidency and presidential power’. Obviously, Trump deployed Twitter to provoke, overrule or humiliate recalcitrant advisers and to pre-empt his staff. From June 2015 until 8 January 2021, Donald Trump sent over 34,000 tweets (max/day: 200 tweets on 5 June 2020). Because of space restrictions, readers are referred to Glenn Kessler et al. (2020), who analysed all of Trump’s lies, fallacies and misleading claims over the years of his presidency (e.g., Wodak 2021: 176–177 for more details).

In sum: Twitter (and other social media) allow for the construction of parallel discourse worlds, parallel realities. Far-right populist agitators continue to use Twitter to spread so-called ‘alternative facts’, conspiracy theories, disinformation and falsehoods. In this way, they have established direct contact with their followers and are able to demonize and delegitimize professional journalism as ‘fake news’ (Wright 2021).

PERFORMING POPULISM

Far-right populist leaders emphasize time and again that – in contrast to mainstream politicians – they really go to the ‘people’, listen to the ‘people’ and work for the ‘people’. For example, in an interview with CNN on 27 June 2018, then Italian minister of the interior Matteo Salvini

(Lega) declared: ‘Listening to the people, being a minister that goes to the cities, to the squares, to the stations, to the hospitals, for me is a duty and a pleasure’. In an atmosphere of enormous distrust of politicians across the EU and beyond, far-right populist parties and their leaders manage to convey empathy, and address discontent and anger in simple and simplistic terms. They convincingly use the phrase ‘against those up there, against the elites’, and successfully position themselves as saviours of the people who feel ‘left behind’ (Wodak 2021: 162–163).

The form of the performance is only one – though an important – part of the specific far-right populist habitus (Moffitt 2016). On the *backstage*, ideologies, agendas and policies are discussed explicitly; party members and followers should understand what they stand for. However, far-right populist leaders know that they must cloak their exclusionary racist policies frontstage. *Form and content* are necessarily linked to construct the specific political agenda. In sum, we are confronted with the continuous violation of taboos and flouting of rules of politeness as well as of conventional norms of political correctness, cleverly implemented by politicians like Trump, Marine Le Pen, Alexander Gauland, Herbert Kickl and so forth. The latter is also labelled ‘bad manners’ (Moffitt 2016).

NORMALIZATION OF FAR-RIGHT POPULISM

As many scholars have repeatedly observed, an Orbánization of Europe is taking place (Fournier 2019; Scheppele 2020). In other words, Orbán’s nativist messages, his repeated warnings with respect to an alleged Islamic threat to Europe’s ‘Christian civilization’, have resonated well and have reached the political mainstream.

Jürgen Link (2019) elaborates that such processes happen in times when ‘normal democracy’ (*Normaldemokratie*) cannot sustain the balance, the antagonistic opposition between the traditionally left and right. This hegemonic consensus has, for example, been disrupted through the many crises that have occurred since 2007. In this way, populisms should not be assessed as ‘normative sins’ against the centre; they should rather lead to discussions of the antagonisms, topics, strategies and interests that have been silenced or tabooed, for example in the so-called refugee crisis. If antagonisms (i.e. conflicts and opposing interests) are not openly debated, windows of opportunity are delivered to populists. Populist parties instrumentalize such opportunities for their diverse interests and policies – in the case of the far right, this means emphasizing nativist nationalism and racism.

Wilhelm Heitmeyer (2018: 293) labels such normalized far-right rhetoric as ‘*rohe Bürgerlichkeit*’ (‘coarse civility’) and analyses the important contribution of elites and the media in shifting the *boundaries of normality*. According to Heitmeyer, such elites can, on the one hand, repeatedly re-establish and strengthen ‘fundamental values’ even in times of great uncertainty; on the other hand, they can also contribute to the relaxation of these very fundamental values (see below). Other in-depth quantitative and qualitative studies have succeeded in tracing such normalizing and recontextualizing, multi-level processes of discursive and political change in even more systematic detail.

For example, we have analysed debates about salient concepts that metonymically condensed significantly different ideological positions towards integration, migration, asylum and so forth, in vehement and antagonistic political struggles in the Austrian context of 2015–2016 (Rheindorf and Wodak 2018). In this way, the term *Integrationsunwilligkeit* (‘unwillingness to integrate’, amongst other terms which condensed complex ideological positions) came to

dominate Austrian political and media discourse in 2015. To trace the recontextualization of this concept, we combined qualitative and quantitative linguistic methods to show its frequency, collocates, contextualization and instrumentalization in legitimizing ever stricter policies. Indeed, this term, which was previously only employed by the FPÖ, has now been established as a fixture in the Austrian media and, by implication, in public discourse. This marks a notable shift in the political discourse on integration by providing an example of the culturalization of discourse on integration, now recontextualized as assimilation.

SHAMELESS NORMALIZATION

Most of the breaches of constitutional order, such as freedom of opinion, freedom of assembly, freedom of press and the independence of the legal system in illiberal democracies (Poland and Hungary), are not announced explicitly; they are made in small – seemingly unimportant – steps (Wodak 2019a, 2019b). As Heather Grabbe and Stefan Lehne (2017: 3) argue, these changes imply ‘mind-closing narratives’, which are obviously ‘gaining force as formerly liberal politicians run after populists’. In this way, national-conservative parties across Europe have shamelessly normalized the discriminatory body politics of the far right to attract the far-right electorate.

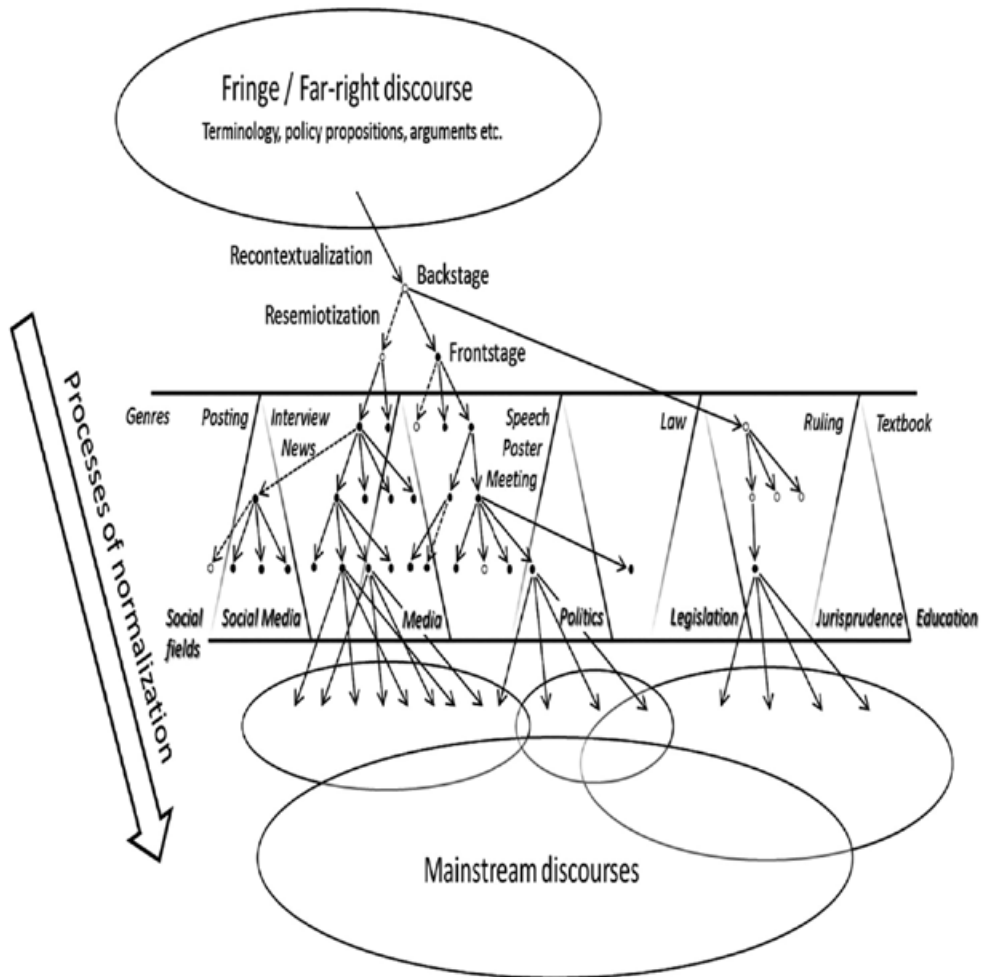
For example, when asked if Austria would open its borders for 100 unaccompanied minors stranded in the camps on Moria, Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg⁷ answered in an interview from 10 September 2020: ‘If we clear the Moria camp, it will be full again... It is also sending the wrong signal, namely that there is hope to get to Europe. That would trigger a chain reaction and we would no longer be in control of the situation... This is a question of common sense’.

Appealing to *common sense* without conveying facts is a typical populist strategy. Schallenberg argues fallaciously that the situation would get out of control if one helped even a few children. A ‘chain reaction’ would follow, a scenario of threat invoked without any facts to substantiate these claims. He framed his remarks by stating: ‘shouting for [fair] distribution [of refugees] would not be the solution’; in this way, any humanitarian appeals were quickly denounced as unproductive and irrational ‘shouts’. In a video message broadcast on 12 September 2020,⁸ former Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz added a fallacy to justify the decision that no unaccompanied minors from Moria should be hosted in Austria:

This inhumane system from 2015, I cannot reconcile this with my conscience... At the European level, we will advocate a holistic approach. What we don’t need is symbolic politics. [Instead] real sustainable support for affected areas, an economic perspective for the African continent, and an effective protection of our external borders [are needed].

Why the policies of 2015 should be assessed as inhumane is not elaborated, no evidence is provided. Kurz explained that he could not reconcile with his conscience not being able to save *all* children, and he fallaciously concluded it would be better not to save even one. Moreover, he denounced the attempts to help refugee children as symbolic politics and cynically emphasized that protecting the external borders was more important than protecting children. The cynical rejection of the Charter of Human Rights and of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child substantiate the dehistoricization and normalization of exclusion.

Figure 21.2 illustrates this cross-sectional approach, revealing the intertextual links between party politics and other discursive fields, sometimes evident and sometimes coded. Normalization processes encompass the incorporation of fringe ideologies into the mainstream – not only of politics but of popular culture and other fields as well – through recontextualizations and resemiotizations, usually moving from backstage to frontstage, and across fields as well as genres (Rheindorf and Wodak 2019: 307).



Source: Adapted from Wodak 2021: 60.

Figure 21.2 Processes of normalization across social fields and genres

CONCLUSIONS

Due to ongoing *normalization processes* and their functions, specifically due to Donald Trump's agenda and performance (2016–2020) and the rise of far-right parties across EU member states since the so-called refugee crisis (2014–2016), bad manners, strategic impoliteness and destructive argumentation (i.e. *eristic argumentation*), as well as the shameless spreading of falsehoods and lies, all of which underlie and enforce a politics of exclusion, are increasingly employed by many far-right (also governing) politicians in debates and election rallies without fear of negative sanctions. Such rhetoric creates 'alternative discourse worlds' and alternative truths, seemingly excluding the very possibility of compromise, negotiation, deliberation and undermining the checks and balances of pluralist democracies. This makes it necessary to study how discursive practices can accomplish exclusion in its many facets via the analysis of *micro politics* without explicitly acknowledging actors' intentions.

As illustrated above, several elements (of content and form) are combined in far-right populist discourse, in context-dependent ways:

- Specific topics are addressed.
- Specific ideologies feed into and constitute utterances and performances.
- Strategies of calculated ambivalence and provocation are used to create and de-escalate intentionally provoked scandals.
- Strategic context-dependent performance is staged depending on backstage or frontstage.
- A continuous campaigning style is employed.

The detailed, in-depth and context-dependent, qualitative and quantitative discourse-analytic approaches and analyses summarized above not only complement other social science analyses; such analyses support, indeed frequently enable, the understanding and explanation of far-right success (and failure) in everyday talk, text and image due to the well-established evidence that discourse produces and reproduces belief systems, ideologies and forms of mediatization and politicization, i.e. discursive and material practices, across many fields of our societies.

NOTES

1. In this chapter I must neglect research on left-wing populisms due to space restrictions (see Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis 2019; Wodak 2021: 36–38 for details).
2. There exists a vast number of studies, reports, papers, edited volumes, special issues and monographs in this area, for example Amlinger and Nachtwey 2022; Bevelander and Wodak 2019; Demata 2023; Heitmayer 2018; Kranert 2020; McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton 2020; Rheindorf 2020; Wodak 2021, 2022; Wodak and Krzyżanowski 2017.
3. See www.dw.com/en/hungarys-viktor-orban-targets-critics-with-soros-mercenaries-blacklist/a-43381963.
4. George Soros is a Hungarian-born American financial trader, author and philanthropist. In 1973 he established the Soros Fund (later Quantum Endowment Fund), a hedge fund whose success made him one of the wealthiest men in the world. Soros is known as an influential supporter of liberal social causes, particularly relating to refugees. In 1984, he used some of his profits to create the Open Society Foundation, a philanthropic organization that continues to support democracy and human rights across the world. The foundation's initial work focused on then-communist Eastern

- Europe – including Hungary, where he awarded scholarships for studying abroad, including one to Viktor Orbán to Oxford (e.g., Richardson and Wodak 2022).
5. See www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/19/brusselsorbán-jean-claude-juncker-poster-george-soros-hungary (see also Richardson and Wodak 2022: 414).
 6. See <https://derstandard.at/2000098647513/Warum-Kickl-aus-Aufnahmestellen-Ausreisezentren-macht>.
 7. See <https://orf.at/stories/3180789/>.
 8. See www.facebook.com/sebastiankurz.at/videos/die-bilder-aus-moria-lassen-niemanden-kalt-/1970115296629561/.

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PART V

RESEARCH AGENDAS IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

22. Populism and political parties

Giovanni Barbieri

INTRODUCTION

Political parties have always represented a privileged object of investigation for political studies. Since its origins, in fact, the development of both political sociology and political science is at least in part due to reflection on this specific research topic. Interest in this field of study has, however, remained unchanged over time, and currently, the attention of scholars is drawn to the alleged crisis or transformation of political parties. Recent times have also seen growing concern for party systems – an issue usually less discussed in the literature than that of political parties – as a result of three distinct phenomena: (1) the democratization wave that occurred in many areas of the world in the last part of the twentieth century; (2) the change of party and political systems in key established democracies (such as in Italy and Belgium); and (3) high levels of partisan dealignment affecting the electorate in many countries.

The reasons behind this deep and long-lasting interest in ‘political parties’ lie, on the one hand, in their relevant role in bridging the social sphere – made up of individuals, groups and movements – with the sphere of political power – which essentially consists of parliament and government – and, on the other hand, in the fact that modern democracy is born and has developed through the operation of political parties. In other words, it is *a democracy of parties*.

This observation has as a logical consequence that the good health and stability of democracy depend on the good health of parties and on the stability of the party system. Now, if we look at the current state of parties, we will immediately notice the deep malaise they are going through (at least in Western Europe). Many indicators point to this state, to varying degrees, in different countries: the increase in electoral abstention and volatility, the decrease in the number and active participation of party members and, above all, the considerable drop in citizens’ confidence in political parties (Webb 2005).

In the eyes of most constituents, indeed, parties represent tools through which the political class aims to realize its own interests, organizations that are merely interested in their self-reproduction, pervaded by phenomena of corruption and not responsive to the demands expressed by individuals and civil society (Torcal and Montero 2006). These criticisms are not new. In fact, in the first stage of the development of the parliamentary regime in the United States, Great Britain and revolutionary France, political parties were considered more as pathological elements than as tools necessary for democracy (Pizzorno 1996).

The current scepticism towards political parties, therefore, has to be framed within an attitude of latent hostility towards such organizations that is anything but unprecedented and that, over time, targets different aspects of them and assumes different forms. The criticism is directed either at single parties or at parties as a whole, and it encourages, as highlighted by Cas Mudde (1996) – who refers to a previous work by Hans Daalder (1992) – the development of two main types of anti-party sentiment or attitudes that then become the grounds for so-called anti-party parties (extremist parties, which call for the elimination of parties, and populist parties, which call for a radical rethinking or selective rejection of parties). The first type considers the party

as an actor devoid of legitimacy that cannot achieve the common good because of the bias of its position. The latter distinguishes between ‘good’ parties and ‘bad’ parties whose policies and behaviours are disapproved (party-centrism, corruption, anti-democratic behaviour and relics of the past); in a nutshell, these ‘bad’ parties are condemned because they act against the interests of their own people.

In established democracies, almost all anti-party parties, by accepting the principles and procedures of democracy, recognizing their legitimacy and participating in electoral competitions, are motivated exclusively by populist sentiments. In other words, they are characterized as populist political parties.

This chapter aims precisely at offering a contribution to the existing debate on the relationship between populism and political parties. The following section, after having clarified the meaning of ‘populist party’, deals with the impact of the phenomenon of populism on the study of political parties and, vice versa, on the contribution given by the analysis centred on populist parties to the development of populism studies more broadly. Subsequently, the attention will focus on three different waves of populism that followed one another over time, and on those studies that, in explaining the increasing success of populist forces in recent times, resort to the concept of ‘cleavage’. Based on such analysis, the thesis that populist parties of all three waves derive from the same unique cleavage (people versus elite) will be put forward and discussed. The chapter will conclude with a few preliminary comments on how populist parties have reacted to two tragic events: the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

POLITICAL PARTIES AND POPULISM STUDIES

To clarify what we mean by populist parties, a brief reflection on the concept of populism is necessary. The nature of the concept is quite ambiguous, slippery and ‘chameleonic’ (Taggart 2000). Although scholarly production on populism is currently flourishing, and many different definitions have consequently been put forward, in my own view three main definitions or conceptual approaches can be identified: (1) the discursive-performative approach (Moffitt 2016); (2) the political-strategic approach (Weyland 2017); and (3) the ideational approach (Mudde 2004). These approaches do not truly compete with each other and rather must be conceived of as different ways of viewing the same phenomenon; as such, each of them has both merits and limits. I believe, however, as Hanspeter Kriesi does (2018; see also Barbieri 2021), that the core of populism is constituted by a set of ideas and that other notions of the phenomenon, namely the discursive-performative and political-strategic ones, must be considered complementary to this core. Therefore, the perspective from which the relationship between populism and political parties is here examined is that of the ideational approach.

This approach conceives of populism as a set of ideas that represent politics as a Manichean struggle between ‘the people’ and a conspiring elite; it focuses on the contents and on the causal properties of these ideas and considers them the key features of the populist forces (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2019; see also Mudde 2017). From this perspective, political parties can be labelled populist if they uphold a set of ideas that is formed by the combination of four elements: (1) the existence of two homogeneous groups: ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’; (2) an antagonistic relationship between these groups; (3) the idea of popular sovereignty; and (4) a Manichean outlook that promotes the positive valorization of the people and denigration of the elite. This view is very similar to that proposed by Stijn van Kessel (2015), who studied

populist parties in Europe based on the cornerstones of the ideational approach to populism. Van Kessel rightly points out that the line of division between populist and non-populist party families in many cases may be very thin and thus not clear-cut. Moreover, he understands the concept of populist party as a classical concept; namely, that a party can be considered populist only if it has all the characteristics included in the definition.

The rapid spread of a (new) wave of populism in many areas of the world since the 1980s has brought many scholars to reflect upon the consequences this has had on the study of political parties. In general, at least three main matters, which can only be discussed briefly here, have come to the fore: (1) new forms of party organization; (2) new instruments and forms of democracy; and (3) personalistic leadership. Of course, it should be noted here that, as highlighted in several studies, the personalistic leader and the unmediated and unorganized relationship between the leader and his/her followers do not constitute central features of populism in particular, even though they may facilitate the expansion of populist ideas (Kriesi 2018; Mudde 2004).

Regarding the organizational dimension, some authors have shown that several (especially right-wing) populist parties have actually assumed many aspects of the mass party model, going against the prevailing trends that characterize the organizational change of mainstream parties (i.e. debureaucratization and more flexible organizational structures). A grassroots following, a strong and locally widespread organization and an institutionalization of both decision-making processes and interactions represent, in fact, the main features gradually developed by these kinds of parties (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016). Other populist parties, such as the Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy, Podemos in Spain and Unbowed France (LFI), have employed digital technology not only to communicate externally but also to promote a radical transformation both of their internal organization and of the democratic and decision-making processes they have adopted. The attention of scholars has thus focused on these new organizational structures, characterized by small staff teams, the absence of a headquarters, virtual access to party processes and documents from any device and the development and adoption of participatory portals. It is no coincidence that parties of this type have been described as start-up, cloud, platform or digital parties (Gerbaudo 2019).

In claiming that politics should be an expression of the people's general will, populism forces students of political parties to tackle once again the issue of deliberative and participatory democracy and of the proposals put forward by many populist parties to implement it: the binding mandate, the law-making referendum without quorum, the recall election, the popular citizen's legislative initiative and new decision-making platforms. The participatory creed considers participation not so much a means to accomplish a certain goal as a goal in itself. In fact, citizens' involvement in public debates and decision making together with political disintermediation, which is made possible by digital technology, are viewed as preconditions for achieving both a politics that protects the common good and an authentic and transparent democracy (Gerbaudo 2019).

Coming, finally, to the last point at issue, many studies show that populism has brought the question of personalistic leadership back to the centre of scholarly attention. Most populist parties have indeed promoted a process of leadership centralization, even if this does not imply the presence of an authoritarian leader who controls every aspect of the party's life and who acts with no reference to the rules and to the party's apparatus. In contrast, as Reinhard Heinisch and Oscar Mazzoleni argue (2016: 228), 'it is often precisely the organisational dimension through which the leadership is able to exercise control over the party'. After all,

the disintermediation process made possible by digital technologies in effect causes higher levels of reintermediation because the parties' leaders and their micro-digital oligarchies or 'magic circle' do have access to the management and control of information technology platforms (Gerbaudo 2019).

Let us now address the question of how research on populist political parties has contributed to the development of the broader field of populism studies. Until the first decade of the 2000s, the latter has almost always been characterized by a lack of methodological and empirical tools that make it possible to assess and measure the phenomenon of populism. However, in recent years, a number of applied empirical enquiries on populist parties and leaders have introduced new research techniques and tools and have thus helped fill this gap.

The Chapel Hill Expert Survey conducted by Ryan Bakker and colleagues (2020), the Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey run by Maurits Meijers and Andrej Zaslove (2020), the PopuList conceived by Matthijs Rooduijn and colleagues (2019) and the Global Party Survey (GPS) directed by Pippa Norris (2020) have employed the expert assessment technique to classify political parties along different dimensions, including that of populism–pluralism. The first three cover European countries, whereas the last expands coverage worldwide, including 1043 political parties in 163 countries. According to our own elaboration of the GPS data (relates to the year 2019), 28.0 per cent of the parties (962 valid cases) are assessed as strongly populist and 32.1 per cent are assessed as moderately populist. Strongly populist parties are particularly widespread in Central Asia (64.7 per cent) and Central Africa (53.3 per cent); they are nonetheless present in significant numbers in the Caribbean (39.1 per cent), Eastern Europe (36.4 per cent) and Southern Europe (34.9 per cent) too. Taking into consideration the economic *left (pro-state) / right (pro-market)* dimension, it can be noted that strongly populist right parties prevail in Oceania (55.0 per cent) and Western Europe (43.8 per cent), while strongly populist left parties are prevalent in Eastern Europe (47.6 per cent).

The Global Populism Dataset, realized by Kirk Hawkins et al. (2019), measures, instead, the level of populist discourse in the speeches (delivered between 2000 and 2018) of 215 chief executives from 66 countries across all continents through the pedagogical assessment technique of holistic grading. The 'text' is considered as a whole; graders assess the discourses under study and assign them a score indicating the level of populism on the basis of both a rubric and some 'anchor texts'.

POPULIST PARTIES AND CLEAVAGE THEORY

The phenomenon of populism has a long history. It is not surprising, therefore, that some scholars have attempted to distinguish different phases of this history on the basis of geographical areas, time periods or ideological features. From a historical analysis of the political parties and movements that have been traditionally considered populist, one can observe an alternation of periods in which populist parties flourished and periods in which populist parties disappeared. On the basis of this analysis and in an attempt to sharpen the previous classifications, it is possible to identify three different waves of populism, essentially those that have recently been listed by Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (2017).

The first wave, which occurred in the period from the middle to the end of the nineteenth century, involved *foundational populism* (Hermet 2001). Although there is no doubt that the word 'populism' arose in Russia in approximately 1870, it is debatable whether the populism

of the Russian *Narodnik* movement is comparable to the populism of subsequent movements and parties (Hermet 2001; Taggart 2000). This first wave, however, surely included the agrarian populism of the American People's Party and, as noted by Guy Hermet, the nationalist French Boulangism.

The second wave, which extended from approximately 1930 to 1960, represents *consolidated* or *classic populism*. Spreading in many Latin American states through the political action of leaders such as Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina and Getúlio Dornelles Vargas in Brazil, this kind of populism was no longer oppositional or marginal but had transformed itself into the state's power and ideology (Hermet 2001; Taggart 2000) – actually, some Latin American populist leaders, such as Hipólito Yrigoyen in Argentina and Jorge Alessandri Rodríguez in Chile, had already made themselves heard back in the 1920s. A different kind of populism, *Poujadism*, emerged during this period in France. Founded in 1953 by Pierre Poujade, the *poujadiste* movement aimed to defend the interests of ordinary people and small business owners against an unfair tax system and an oppressive regime and called for the convocation of an Estates-General to respond to the people's grievances.

The third wave, which started in the 1980s and continues today, can be labelled the wave of *multi-faceted populism*. Currently, therefore, the populist parties landscape seems to be much more diversified, nuanced and complex than in the past and in many respects, including: position on the right–left dimension; organizational structures (formal/informal, centralized/decentralized, low/high articulated); and leadership (personalized/not personalized, divided/not divided). Generally speaking, at least four different types of populism have come to the fore over this more recent and ongoing period:

- *Nationalist populism*, embodied by parties such as the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), Flemish Interest in Belgium (VB), National Rally in France (former National Front, RN), Lega in Italy, Party for Freedom in the Netherlands and Sweden Democrats. Both the latter and VB are characterized, differently from the others, by a divided leadership. VB and FPÖ are characterized by relevant levels of regional autonomy (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016).
- *Latin American populism*, with key figures like Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia, which was preceded by the neoliberal populism of leaders such as Fernando Collor de Mello in Brazil, Alberto Fujimori in Peru and Carlos Menem in Argentina. The Fifth Republic Movement, founded by Chávez in 1997, and the Movement for Socialism, founded by Morales in 1998, are examples of centralized parties with a strong leadership, with the latter featuring a strong grassroots movement component.
- *Progressive populism* of some European radical left parties, such as SYRIZA in Greece, Podemos in Spain, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia in Czechia and LFI. According to GPS data, the first two would be classified as moderate populist, whereas the other two as strongly populist (Damiani 2020).
- *Polyvalent populism*, expressed by political parties that locate themselves outside the left–right dimension, such as M5S in Italy (Pirro 2018). This party, as already noted, shares with Podemos and LFI the use of digital technology and participatory platform in order to create flexible and open structures that can promote active political participation.

In recent times, scholars have made significant efforts to explain the surge of this third wave, taking up the cleavage theory put forward many years ago by Seymour Lipset and Stein Rokkan (Bornschieer 2010; De Wilde et al. 2019; Kriesi et al. 2008; Norris and Inglehart

2019). Beyond the predictable differences in terminology, as well as in the geographical areas under investigation – Western Europe in most cases and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries in other cases – these studies seem to share the same premises and to reach similar important conclusions.

The main points around which the thesis of the aforementioned authors revolves can be briefly summarized as follows:

- The globalization process represents a critical juncture that has changed the meaning and salience of the traditional economic and cultural cleavages or that has led to the emergence of a new cleavage.
- The cultural cleavage undergoes the greatest transformation, evolving into a ‘new’ opposition between integration (through globalization), libertarian and cosmopolitan values, on the one hand, and demarcation (from globalization), traditional and communitarian values, on the other; it moreover experiences a growth of salience.
- The two poles of the cultural cleavage reflect the emergence of a new structural conflict opposing the ‘winners’ to the ‘losers’ of globalization; the first includes the entrepreneurs and qualified employees in sectors open to international competition as well as cosmopolitan citizens, whereas the other encompasses entrepreneurs and qualified employees in traditionally protected sectors, all unqualified employees and citizens who strongly identify with their national community.
- The established parties’ lack of responsiveness to the grievances of globalization losers gives populist right parties a chance to mobilize them. In fact, these conservative groups that share authoritarian values constitute the potential supporters of this kind of party, which has taken root and gained increasing support throughout Europe.

The ‘global’ nature of populism, that is, its extension in time and space, leads to the hypothesis that this cleavage represents a manifestation of a wider opposition, from which all populist parties originate, that counterposes ‘the people’ with ‘the elite’ (and a participatory form of democracy with an elitist one) (see Barbieri 2021). This opposition is not constantly active; that is, it is able to produce effects only under certain circumstances, when certain critical junctures occur. The manifestations of this opposition differ in time and space; hence, populist parties with different features can emerge from it.

These observations raise the question of whether the aforementioned opposition can be considered, in turn, a cleavage, which could be added to the four traditional ones pinpointed by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) – centre/periphery, state/church, rural/urban and owner/worker. The most appropriate way to face this question is: (1) to clarify what a cleavage is – which is a somewhat controversial issue; and (2) to enquire whether the ‘people–elite’ line of division holds all the properties that define a cleavage as such – which could be even more open to debate.

With regard to the first point, it must be highlighted that ‘Although the term cleavage structure is central to Rokkan’s thinking, he never truly tried to define it explicitly, and we can only infer its meaning from his usage’ (Flora 1999: 34). It is not by chance that scholars have put forward a large variety of definitions that are often not compatible with each other. Following Peter Flora, it can be argued that cleavages represent the main oppositions within national communities that stem from the multiplicity of conflicts rooted in the social structure. In other words, only some conflicts (the strongest ones) that endure over time, despite having lost their original salience, and those capable of polarizing politics constitute proper cleavages.

These permanent (often latent) oppositions between different homogeneous social groups usually break out when certain critical junctures – that is, times of radical change – arise. Finally, cleavages cause the birth of specific political parties and specific party systems as well as long-term alignments between opposing social groups and associated parties. This means that the social conflicts expressed by these cleavages are politicized when opposing social groups assume a collective identity and these identities are politically organized (most characteristically, but not exclusively, in the form of a political party).

To constitute a cleavage, therefore, a political divide must include three elements: a socio-structural element (be it a class, religious belief, ethnic group, etc.); a collective identity of this social group; and, finally, an organizational manifestation in the form of collective action or an enduring organization of the involved social groups (Bartolini and Mair 1990).

Regarding the second point, I will try to show below that the people–elite opposition may be considered a cleavage if one refers to a specific account of the people, that is, when one confers to the term ‘people’ a specific meaning. As one can easily realize, the issue at stake is rather thorny: the heterogeneity between different definitions of ‘the people’ has marked the history of the concept that, from time to time, has come to designate different concrete or imagined aspects or processes of human aggregations.

As Paulina Ochoa Espejo highlights (2017; see also Urbinati 2019), two main different and contrasting accounts of ‘the people’ dominate democratic theory: the hypothetical and the historical, to which she adds a third account, that of ‘the people’ as a process. According to the first description, supported mostly by liberal constitutionalists, the people do not represent an actual collection of individuals but rather an ideal reference, an abstract construction that guides legislation, establishes the legitimacy of the state through a constitution and guarantees the legitimate representative government as well as the rights of both individuals and ever present minorities.

In the second description, upheld not only by populists but also by many theorists of democracy (Butler 2016; Grattan 2016), the people are instead extracted through an act of exclusion because those who belong to the establishment or elite are not considered to be part of the people. The distinction between the two groups pertains to the possession of state power, and it is therefore strictly connected to the political dimension. Nevertheless, it also has a moral nature because the elites, unlike the people, are led by a limitless individualism and are completely disengaged from both the past and the community in which they are integrated (Lasch 1995). Consequently, the people considerably differ from the elite in terms of economic resources and opportunities, as well as in terms of lifestyle.

In the tension between the two aforementioned descriptions lies the third supported by Ochoa Espejo, which considers the people ‘an unfinished process, [which] no one can claim to fully represent... a procedure of decision-making, by which individuals interact with each other mediated by legal institutions that channel popular demands and force representatives to adopt views and make decisions’ (Ochoa Espejo 2017: 608, 615).

Now, from all this it seems clear that if one conceives of the people as an ongoing process or even more as an ideal reference, they cannot represent a concrete social group able to develop a collective identity that opposes the power elite. Accordingly, talking about a people–elite cleavage would not be entirely correct. This, however, would be possible within a historical account. The people, from this perspective, are an actual group of individuals who unify themselves due to the appearance of great disparities with respect to the elites, both from a political viewpoint – different levels of power, different opportunities to participate in the

decision-making process and different privileges – and from a socio-economic one – different lifestyles, levels of income, interests and opportunities.

Those who are not part of the elite soon become aware of both the increasingly great distance that separates them from the elite and a sense of sharing the same living conditions, worries and destiny that links them to other people; accordingly, they develop a sense of belonging to the people and a shared collective identity. This happens because of the weakening of the traditional lines of division, such as those based on gender, social class or education, that are overcome and made almost completely ineffective by the populist line of division. Clearly, elites are largely responsible for the development of this collective identity when they behave and act with little consideration of the needs of the people.

Can the people/elite opposition therefore be considered a cleavage? This can certainly be the case if one deals with this from the perspective of a historical account. The people, indeed, represent an empirical element that we can define in social-structural terms, even though it differs in many respects from the other elements taken into account by Rokkan and Lipset, such as that of class. The latter, beyond being a narrower concept, is first rooted in the economic structure of society and only subsequently acquires a political connotation. The people, instead, diverge from the elite primarily in relation to the possession of political power and only subsequently also from a socio-economic point of view. The people are moreover able to develop a sense of identity, in particular only in certain situations, when specific critical junctures occur – for example, globalization, which concerns the third wave of populism. In these critical situations, the salience of traditional cleavages fails, the external boundaries of the people become prominent and a commitment to protecting them constitutes an essential component of the individual identity. Finally, the third element of a cleavage, that is, the organizational manifestation in the form of collective action, does not take long to manifest itself; the social conflicts expressed by the ‘populist’ political divide are indeed soon politicized, and populist parties or movements with different features – radical right, radical left, ethno-regionalist, etc. – emerge in the political scenario.

Because it is cross-cut by divisions – of class, religion, etc. – that can only be temporarily overcome, the populist cleavage usually does not have a long life. It freezes for some time, and then it unfreezes with the appearance of new critical junctures. If we go in search of its date of birth, this may be placed in the same period during which the traditional cleavages emerged, that is that following the democratic revolutions. In fact, the people became a relevant political actor during the course of the English Glorious Revolution in the late seventeenth century (in an imperfect and incomplete way), of the American Revolution around a century later (in a triumphant but doubtful way) and of the French Revolution around the same time (in a radical but chaotic and inconsistent way) (Mény and Surel 2000). During the Glorious Revolution, for instance, the two Westminster Houses, gathered on behalf of the *demos* in January 1689, decided that William and Mary d’Orange would no longer reign by divine right but rather by popular consent, creating a limited monarchy.

After all, as Barrington Moore observed many years ago, these revolutionary episodes must be included among the factors that triggered the democratization process, the first because it helped limit royal absolutism and the others because they helped to curb, in different ways, the power of a rural aristocracy that hindered the achievement of a democratic political system (Moore 1966). Indeed, the debate on the actual role of the people arose as soon as democracy began to consolidate, that is, as soon as the principle of popular sovereignty was broadly accepted. An awareness of the distance between real and ideal democracy as well as

an awareness of the existence of different conceptions of democracy raised a set of questions regarding the exercise of power by the people, the relationship between citizens and their elected representatives in parliament and the institutions called upon to express the people's will (Mény and Surel 2000).

CONCLUSION

As highlighted in this chapter, political parties as a field of study has proven to be closely intertwined with a renewed interest in populism due to the growing success of many populist parties and leaders in the last few years. On the one hand, the emergence of a new wave of populism in the 1980s turned scholarly attention to new forms of party organization, democracy and personalistic leadership that populist parties seem to have adopted. On the other hand, several researchers, applying new research techniques and instruments to measure the level of populism expressed by both political parties and leaders, have greatly contributed to developing the study of populism from an empirical point of view.

From a historical perspective, both the current and past waves of populism can be seen as the result of a unique cleavage that counterposes the people with the elite, and a participatory form of democracy with an elitist one. Emerging for the first time at the end of the democratic revolutions, this cleavage returns unchanged over time, even if it reactivates itself only when specific critical macro and micro junctures emerge. This entails that populist parties with diverse and even opposite characteristics can emerge from it. In this respect, the new wave of populism, triggered by the critical juncture of globalization, has produced a great variety of populist parties. Many of them belong to the family of populist radical right parties, others locate themselves on the opposite side of the political spectrum, while some, such as the early M5S, represent a 'pure' form of populism, neither right nor left.

In recent years, these parties have had to face two major challenges, which have questioned both their resilience and their characteristics: the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. On the first issue, research has already produced interesting findings, such as those presented in the study edited by Giorgos Katsambekis and Yannis Stavrakakis (2020). The second topic has not yet been deeply explored. The issue is of particular importance as some populist parties had economic and financial linkages with Russia – as is the case, for instance, of the French RN – whereas others seem to promote political and cultural values very similar to those of Putin – including, in this regard, the Hungarian Fidesz. The populist party galaxy is extremely manifold, as are therefore the reactions of these parties to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. On the one hand, several parties, such as Polish Law and Justice, have always had an anti-Putin stance; others, by contrast, such as the small Dutch Forum for Democracy, see the West as having sole responsibility for the invasion; and still others, such as the Italian Lega, have admitted to changing their minds on Putin, now considering him an authoritarian leader. The relation of populist parties to autocratic leaders of other countries and to the war, which implies a focus on their foreign policies, undoubtedly represents a significant research topic for populism studies. A deeper exploration of this issue surely deserves a central place within future research.

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23. Populism and social movements

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of ‘populism’, used in a more or less critical way, has remained rather marginal in social movement studies. Different mobilizations have been debated with reference to varying conceptualizations of populism, both on the right and the left, such as the grassroots mobilizations of Donald Trump supporters that led to the storming of the United States Capitol on 6 January 2021, but also the mass protests against austerity and the political status quo across South European countries within the context of the Great Recession in the early 2010s. Different conceptions of populism have been thus enlisted to address a range of recent trends in social movements. Social movement scholars looking at the radical right have discussed some transformations with reference to its rhetorical appeals to ‘the people’ as well as to their combination with xenophobic discourses; social movement scholars have also looked at the resistance to the spreading of right-wing populism put forward by progressive movements on the left. Moreover, research has addressed the ways in which appeals to ‘the people’ against ‘the elites’ are embedded in traditional left-wing agendas advancing social equality and justice (Aslanidis 2016; García Agustín 2020). In addition, references to a specific form of populism have been elaborated when addressing the ‘movements of the squares’ mobilizing against austerity policies since 2011. Their ideology has been defined as ‘anarcho-populism’, a type of political culture that bridges democratic populism, which understands popular sovereignty as territorial control and neo-anarchism as a sort of ‘libertarian and individualist’ variant of ‘the people’ (Gerbaudo 2017: 8). The citizens are here opposed to the oligarchy of privileged economic and political elites, with claims for citizenship becoming a source of dignity against the continuous erosion of citizens’ rights (Gerbaudo 2017).

The concept of populism has been utilized in the analysis of interactions between social movements and political parties. Looking at regressive actors, scholars have noted the ‘pathological normalcy’ – at times also referred to as a style, syndrome or doctrine (Stanley 2008) – by which a specific breed of parties is thriving on a radicalization of mainstream values (Betz 2003; Mudde 2007). Looking at progressive actors, the concept of populism has also been used to describe some of the emerging left-wing parties that have gained momentum and even become pivotal political players– e.g. SYRIZA in Greece, Podemos in Spain, France Insoumise in France, Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 at the European level and the Corbyn and Sanders campaigns in the United Kingdom and the United States, respectively (García Agustín 2020; Kioupiolis and Katsambekis 2018).

In what follows, we aim at highlighting the potential for reciprocal interactions between populism research and social movement studies and critically reflect on how social movement studies and movement-associated approaches have contributed to our understanding of recent developments in contentious politics, addressing, in different ways, the concept of populism. In line with the diverse focus of this *Research Handbook*, we look at populism from a social movement perspective, both theoretically (what one field of study can contribute to the other

and how corresponding notions and analytical tools have been and/or can be combined) and empirically (how the interaction between populism and movements manifests in societies, either in the form of institutional actors like parties, leaders, etc. interacting with movements or indeed in the form of populist social movements). After a presentation of the conceptualization of populism within social movement studies, we highlight research on progressive and regressive variants of populism.

POPULISM AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: ON THINNESS AND FRAMES

Much research on populism has been concerned with party and movement actors that have gained increasing prominence, as has been the case in most European regions since the Second World War. In Italy, older and newer populist formations – such as the (Northern) League (Lega) and the Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle) – coalesced to rule the country between 2018 and 2019, relying on the support of half of the Italian electorate. In Southern Europe, new parties have emerged on the right contesting mainstream right-wing parties, with a strong anti-elitist rhetoric. The same has been true in countries such as Germany and in Northern Europe. The ‘illiberal turn’ that is sweeping Central and Eastern Europe cannot be dissociated from the rise to power of right-wing populist parties and leaders, especially in countries such as Poland and Hungary. And seismic events like Brexit would be difficult to interpret without the influence exerted by the right-wing populist UK Independence Party.

As a result of quite abrupt changes in the European party systems and a related backlash, populism has become an integral part of our political jargon. In more or less convincing ways, the label has been attached to politicians, parties, movements as well as voters of varying social backgrounds and ideological persuasions. Populist parties have then been connected to populist movements that mobilize against a perceived degrading of popular sovereignty, considered as corrupted by evil and self-serving elites. Populism has been seen as based on an identification of two ideal loci of control: the government with its powers and ‘the people’ as the ultimate source of authority in the state (Ochoa Espejo 2011). Presenting a dualist worldview juxtaposing a righteous people and a treacherous elite, populism prescribes that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people (Mudde 2004), further supporting that ‘democratic politics need[s] to be conducted differently and closer to the people’ (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017: 4). Populist actors place an antagonistic distinction between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ at the heart of their worldview (Mudde 2017). Together with other fields, social movement studies registered the influence of various approaches to populism: ideational approaches, considering it as a thin ideology (Mudde 2004); discursive approaches, focusing on the hegemonic logic of populism as revolving around the rhetorical appeal to ‘the people’ as a unified community (Laclau 2005); and in strategic approaches, pointing at the unmediated relations between personalized leadership and amorphous masses (Weyland 2001).

The ‘chameleonic character’ and ‘empty heart’ of populism has also been discussed (Taggart 2000). This observation has two broad implications, as discussed by Andrea Pirro and Martín Portos (2021). First, populist actors can emerge in different socio-economic and political contexts, as well as adapt to changing circumstances (Betz 1994). Second, populisms vary a lot as a reference to the people can be combined with references to nativism, socialism,

liberalism, etc. (e.g. Mudde 2004; Pirro 2017; van Kessel 2015; Zaslove 2008). We could therefore speak of populist parties, movements and supporters that can be located anywhere along the ideological left–right spectrum (Mudde 2017: 39), irrespective of their context of origin. Populism’s travelling capacity is indeed of the utmost importance in tackling engagement by voters of disparate populist parties. Despite its alleged repudiation of politics as the process for resolving conflict, populism is ‘not without politics or apolitical’ and ‘is driven to engagement with politics but in a way that is at odds with that politics’ (Taggart 2018: 81).

Populism’s thin nature means that it is unable to stand alone as a comprehensive political ideology as ‘it lacks the capacity to put forward a wide-ranging and coherent programme for the solution to crucial political questions’ (Stanley 2008: 95). Moreover, it has been argued that populism is not a mere top-down affair that is endogenous to strict electoral contestation (Aslanidis 2016, 2017, 2018). Rather, it involves a ‘compelling political dialect’ that informs bottom-up grassroots mobilization and waves of protest worldwide, at times leading to party system transformations and shaping democratization processes (Aslanidis 2017). In recent times, the lack of common programmes among even right-wing populist organizations is confirmed by the variety of positions on the COVID-19 pandemic and pandemic policies among populist leaders or populist movements (Mudde 2020; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2020).

While populist studies help social movement scholars in reflecting on the importance of the struggles over the definition of the people and popular sovereignty, social movement studies can provide important tools to empirically analyse processes of identification, through cognitive as well as affective mechanisms. A main contribution coming from social movement studies to the analysis of ideational as well as discursive definitions of populism is related to the use of the concept of frames as well as in its connection with specific practices. Located below the level of (broad and fixed) ideology, *frames* can be conceived as worldviews that guide public behaviour. Framing theories are rooted in the symbolic interactionist and constructionist principle that meanings are not naturally attached to objects, events or experiences. Addressing the symbolic construction of external reality, frame analysis focuses on the ways in which organizations bridge different, specific topics (Snow and Byrd 2007).

The concept of frame was coined by Erving Goffman in his seminal work *Frame Analysis* (1974). In social movement research, frame analysis is a tool used to study the mix of backward-looking and forward-looking objectives, as stated by collective actors. In other words, frames are the cultural interpretive processes that mediate the attribution of meanings: they are the dominant worldviews that guide and coordinate the behaviour of social movement organizations (Snow and Benford 1988). Indeed, research has emphasized the relevance of framing processes for understanding mobilization dynamics: to recruit new members and keep on motivating individuals who are already mobilized, social movement organizations are bound to build rationales for action and engagement (Lindekilde 2014).

Framing perspectives have acquired a prominent role in understanding the ways in which problems are defined, solutions are suggested and people are mobilized, going beyond the simple definition of a claim as a demand. The analysis of frames allows consideration of how collective actors involved in a debate construct and communicate their visions of reality. Framing singles out identity and oppositional frames by distinguishing ‘us’ from ‘them’ (Caiani et al. 2012). Crucially, social movement scholars have explored how, during the Great Recession, activists were able to construct, through meaning-making struggles, a common ‘master frame’ (Aslanidis 2018) based on a ‘common language’ (Tarrow 2013), which informs ‘a wide array of protest events, providing movement entrepreneurs with a generic rubric for

blame attribution, amenable to customization and adaptation to particular needs and objectives' (Aslanidis 2017: 308). Attention focused, in particular, on claims for citizenship rights against corrupt elites as well as the posited corruption of democracy (della Porta 2015).

Frames thus refer to the symbolic construction of external reality by performing three main functions (Snow and Benford 1988). First, frames focus attention by determining what, in relation to the object of orientation, is relevant (i.e. what is 'in-frame') and what is irrelevant (i.e. what is 'out-of-frame') in our sensorial field. Second, they help to articulate narratives by tying together different aspects, so one set of meanings is conveyed to the detriment of others. Third, frames transform the ways in which objects of attention are seen or conceived and their relationships between one another or to the actors.

There are two different approaches to framing within social movement scholarship that are both relevant for the analysis of populism. On the one hand, a body of literature that emphasizes cognitive processes looks at the ways in which individuals frame events into familiar categories in order to make sense of social dynamics (Gamson 1988). Looking, instead, at the meso level, many contributions have shed light on the symbolic construction of reality by collective entrepreneurs and organizations (Snow and Benford 1988).

Normally, these processes of meaning attribution consist of three different stages. First, certain occurrences, which previously might have been attributed to individual responsibility or to natural factors and phenomena, are recognized and identified as problems; second, potential strategies to cope with them are developed; and third, motivations to act upon this knowledge are put forward. According to Snow and Benford (1988), these three steps correspond to the diagnostic, prognostic and motivational dimensions of framing.

What is the problem? Why should we protest? Who are 'we'? Who stands against 'us'? What is to be done?... There is now extensive evidence that movement entrepreneurs strategically frame their own responses to tap into the wider cultural context and align audiences with their favoured worldviews, maximising support for their objectives. (Aslanidis 2017: 307)

While the relevance of discursive constructs and their repertoires of contentious language that emerge during specific critical junctures is widely accepted in social movement studies, this was not always the case (Tarrow 2013). Overlooked in the past, 'empirical studies illustrate the paramount role of framing processes in mobilising individuals for contentious action... rendering frame analysis indispensable when aiming to provide a comprehensive study of contentious action that incorporates the strategic concerns of movement entrepreneurs' (Aslanidis 2017: 307).

In sum, the analysis of the framing of 'the people' by social movement actors seems most relevant in times of accelerated changes, helping to understand how both progressive and regressive movements have bridged their traditional claims to consider the momentum of the 'populist moment' (Mouffe 2018).

PROGRESSIVE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE POPULIST FRAMING

Social movement scholars have conceptualized left-wing populism as a combination of the populist impetus of expanding representation, through appeals to 'the people' against 'the elites', with a more traditional left-wing agenda promoting equality and social justice (García

Agustín 2020). From a historical perspective, mobilizations that appeal to ‘the people’ have been strong and influential on the left: starting from the *Narodniki* in nineteenth-century Russia, up to the *Piqueteros* in Argentina in the 1990s or the *Caracazo* in Venezuela in 1989 (Rossi 2017), and the more recent pro-democracy and anti-austerity ones, such as Occupy Wall Street, the Greek and Spanish *indignados* and other movements that swept across the world from 2011 onward (della Porta 2015). Paris Aslanidis’ (2016, 2017, 2018) comparative analysis of the collective action frames employed by movement entrepreneurs during the Great Recession shows that activists were able to mobilize different types of grievances and diffuse sentiments around popular sovereignty. Indeed, a populist frame emerged ‘as the master frame of the cycle, encapsulating the adversarial discourse of the dominant dichotomy of a noble “people” and a corrupt “elite” that resonated strongly with mobilised individuals’ (Aslanidis 2018: 443). The opposition between the people and the elites was particularly useful in bringing together different sectors of the population with widely diverging social, political and economic backgrounds toward a shared vision of the 99 per cent (Aslanidis 2018: 443–445). This was reflected in the main repertoire of action and in the emerging camps, with citizens converging in an open space (della Porta 2015).

Economic globalization has been a main target for progressive social movements, which have called it responsible for declining citizens’ rights, labour market dynamics and increasing inequalities within and across nations (della Porta and Portos 2022). Indeed, most available empirical evidence stresses the left-wing orientation of many protest activities and protesters themselves (Pirro and Portos 2021). Forms of direct action and civil disobedience have spread together with demands for radical change. The embracing of neoliberalism by centre-left parties make them lose appeal among the economic ‘losers’ of globalization. While right-wing populism attacks cosmopolitan visions promoting exclusive nationalist identities (see below), central to the framing of progressive actors on the left is, everywhere, the condemnation of extreme social inequality and/or related political corruption, and the quest, instead, for justice and democracy (della Porta and Portos 2022). Indeed, left-wing populist parties acquire a hybrid form and incorporate different traditions and ideological references such as socialism, populism and republicanism in order to reach a social majority and expand democracy (García Agustín 2020).

In addition, on the left, appeals to the citizens have been most often framed within participatory organizational cultures, usually combined with calls for direct democracy (see Gerbaudo 2017). Indeed, several innovations promote a logic of commoning, based on egalitarian, autonomous and solidarity visions of democracy (Howarth and Roussos 2022). A type of democratic populism, referring to popular sovereignty as territorial control, has also been seen as connected to an anarcho-populism as an individualist, libertarian variant of ‘the people’ (Gerbaudo 2017: 8). The citizens are here opposed to the oligarchy of privileged economic and political elites, with claims for citizenship becoming a source of dignity against the continuous erosion of citizens’ rights (Gerbaudo 2017). As Alexandros Kioupkiolis (2019: 9) noted, the anti-austerity progressive protests that have been associated with left-wing forms of populism can be conceptualized as ‘post-populist’ (or as ‘populism 2.0’) when promoting open, participatory and egalitarian forms of constructing power from below. Opposing the ‘normal and common people’ to political and financial elites, they promote cooperation within decentralized networks, which recognize diversity, plurality and reflexivity as common values (Kioupkiolis 2019). Related practices challenge hierarchical visions of concentrating power in

the hands of a personalized leadership that, according to Kurt Weyland's (2017: 53ff.) strategic approach, characterizes other types of populism.

As has been empirically documented, both relatively well-organized and poorly organized progressive movements have emerged in a variety of political and economic contexts in Latin America (Roberts 2006), calling for a reconstitution of 'the people' through the development of new collective identities going beyond class. Powerful, and sometimes successful, mobilizations appealed to 'the people', rather than to a particular class, in their attempts to bridge claims against different forms of discrimination and to challenge the neoliberal models in place. Important examples range from the rise of Chavismo in Venezuela in 1999 to the election of left-leaning governments over the last couple of decades in Brazil (2003), Uruguay (2004), Ecuador (2006), Bolivia (2006) and, more recently, Chile and Colombia (2022). In addition, left-wing actors have been studied through the concept of populism in Southern European countries like Greece and Spain, with reference to political parties such as Podemos in Spain and SYRIZA in Greece. In this regard, scholars have stressed that left-wing populism does not represent a danger for European democracies (García Agustín and Briziarelli 2018; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). Analysing the Democracy in Europe Movement 2025, the transnational left political project launched by former Greek minister Yanis Varoufakis to 'democratise Europe', Benjamin De Cleen and colleagues (2020) explored how the organization constructed a 'European people' in opposition to an international 'elite', and how the movement party negotiates its populism, national appeals and transnationalism by addressing at the same time national 'peoples' and a transnational 'people'.

In sum, scholars who have used the concept of populism in research on left-wing movements have pointed at the importance of the growing concentration of power in the hands of a tiny oligarchy and the corresponding stripping off of citizens' rights. Social movements mobilizing against neoliberalism and social and political inequalities have opposed such oligarchic tendencies and called for social justice and 'real' democracy. In their practice, this vision has related to forms of direct action oriented towards the convergence of an overwhelming majority (the 99 per cent) through the creation of public spaces and participatory 'commons' managed through horizontal structures (della Porta 2015). Rather than retreating from representative institutions, these progressive movements have often experimented with forms of institutional participation, creating movement parties (defined as parties that develop from within social movements, keeping organizational and ideational linkages with them), launching referendums from below and renewing constitutional processes.

EXCLUSIVE POPULISM AND THE RADICAL RIGHT

Populism has been a concept often utilized to point at shifts within the broader far-right spectrum, both in extreme right illiberal parties and in radical right anti-democratic movements (see Pirro 2022). If the old, fascist far right has been identified with ultra-nationalism, the myth of decadence, rebirth (anti-democracy) and conspiracy theories (Eatwell 1996), since the 1990s the most prominent strand of the far right has been rather associated with populism, mostly in the form of populist radical right parties characterized by nativism (nationalism/racism) and authoritarianism (Mudde 2007: 11–31). Several conceptualizations have been proposed, linking populism to far-right parties, including the new populist right, anti-immigration populist parties, right-wing populism, radical right populism or simply populist parties

(Mudde 2007; Rydgren 2004; van Kessel 2015; Zaslove 2008). Research on the far right has increasingly stressed the importance of non-electoral participation of both populist right voters (Pirro and Portos 2021) and far-right organizations. In this sense, the need to build upon some insights of social movement studies for the analysis of the far right has been stressed (Castelli Gattinara and Pirro 2019). From PEGIDA in Germany to the ‘Identitarians’ in France, far-right social movement organizations have bridged nativist and authoritarian frames with populist appeals against the (cosmopolitan) elites, using different forms of protest.

In general, ideational and discursive definitions of populism have been considered particularly resonant with the far-right Manichean vision, while organizational definitions have pointed at the traditional importance of vertical organizational structures and the cult of an absolute leader in far-right milieus. Focusing on far-right social movement organizations in Germany, Italy and the United States, Manuela Caiani and colleagues (2012) investigated the re-emergence in (current) far-right discourses of elements that are considered typical of older far-right ideology and rhetoric, as well as their association with neopopulist frames. Indeed, the populist frames of these milieus involved especially a criticism of the corruption of the political elites in Italy, a strong emphasis on the (racial) definition of the people in Germany and the combination of a racial and religious definition of ‘the people’ in the United States. More generally, far-right frames about ‘the people’ contain a rather *exclusive* vision that refers to a strongly *hierarchical* and *elitist* conception of society. Indeed, not only corrupt political elites but also other groups (e.g. ethnic minorities, political adversaries, supranational actors) are excluded from ‘the people’ as populism is linked by far-right parties to nationalism. Interpreting populism as a frame, the research points at the dichotomous relationship between the people and the elites, and at the concept of popular sovereignty and subsequently that of charismatic leadership, underlining similarities and differences between various far-right groups.

A strategic approach to populism resonates with widespread attempts to create a direct connection between the people and political power, bypassing the electoral process (Fella and Ruzza 2009). Indeed, far-right social movement organizations often see people’s aspirations as betrayed by corrupt political elites. The charismatic leader, highlighted by a strategic conceptualization of populism, is the one who embodies the will of the common people and can speak on their behalf. As the concept refers to a direct relationship between the pure people and the leader (against the corrupt elite), right-wing populism is characterized by the singling out of the pure people in the radical right-wing vision of society, and the kind of relationship that exists between the people and the leader. Within an elitist vision of society, the people are represented as rather ‘misguided’ and in need of a guide (explicitly identified with the far right itself). Many statements point to the *exclusive character of the people*, referring to ethno-national characteristics to identify ‘the people’ with the (ethnic) nation. Through a process of frame bridging (Snow and Benford 1988), different frames relate to each other, connecting *populism* with the *ethno-nationalism* typical of the (old) radical right, with the pure people opposed to the (corrupt) political elites, which is described as timorous and as in need of a leader (Caiani et al. 2012). In sum, the role of ordinary people in the envisaged change/revolution is considered as very limited, as just supporters of right-wing activists (Caiani et al. 2012).

Radical right social movement organizations and movement parties that promote a populist vision opposing cosmopolitan elites to the people, defined in ethnic, nativist terms, tend, however, to keep quite a vertical structure with closed membership, well-structured organi-

zations and broad powers enjoyed by the leadership (Castelli Gattinara and Pirro 2019). This is visible not only in movement parties such as Jobbik in Hungary or Casa Pound in Italy, but also in social movement organizations, like PEGIDA in Germany proclaiming ‘We are the people’.

When looking at general transformations in democracy, right-wing populism has been considered as a main regressive challenge, while left-wing populism often emerged as an opportunity for democratic deepening (della Porta 2020). Far-right groups infuse populist frames with authoritarian, anti-democratic political conceptions, with a cult of a heroic elite that is often rooted in the national history. In current European and American backlash politics, this idea is now framed within a populist discourse, in which some traditional conservative claims are articulated with the protection of the people against a corrupt political class. Anti-capitalism framed as a return to traditional values – although accompanied by the promotion of national (inclusive of capitalist) economic interests and corporatist anti-class discourses – also belongs to the ideological toolkit of the far right. With the populist turn, the political and economic elites are seen as traitors to the nation. The ensuing economic and social discourse is ambivalent, with a rejection of neoliberalism and appealing to a ‘fair market economy’ (Mudde 2007), with particular attention to the small (traditional) business.

These traditional elements are connected to some ‘neoon’ concerns, with what has been defined as a backlash against the moral revolution of the new social movements in terms of women’s rights, gender rights and civil rights in general. In the 1990s, far-right politics was defined as an anti-modern and counterrevolutionary reaction against post-materialism. In recent years, although selectively and unequally, a ‘religious revival’ has given new emphasis to the defence of traditional family values, which had already characterized the rhetoric of many fascist regimes and neofascist parties and movements. Developed within religious institutions and promoted by right-wing movement organizations and parties, anti-gender ideas have been articulated with the defence of traditional values and identities. In this discursive strategy, the rhetorical toolkit also includes the spreading of fear against minority groups, who are portrayed as perpetrators of attacks against the nation (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018).

However, research on contemporary far-right movements has also revealed a capacity to adapt to emerging discursive opportunities, identifying new interpretations of modernity. So, old frames are bridged with new, emerging concerns. Following increasing stigmatization of discourse of ethnic superiority, old racist-supremacist frames have been accompanied by a new discourse of defence of ethnic purity through separateness (Caiani et al. 2012). In European and American backlash movements, anti-globalization frames update the traditional far-right discourses on economic issues to the neoliberal era, with the proposal of welfare chauvinism, with services and subsidies reserved for the autochthons.

Resonating with a range of issues at the heart of right-wing authoritarian nativist ideology, the debate on the Charlie Hebdo attacks represented a further opportunity for far-right movements to access the public sphere to exploit fear, while also presenting themselves as champions of Western civilization, including an ambivalent defence of modernity. (della Porta et al. 2020)

In reaction to the financial crisis, movement parties have emerged, or been strengthened, on the radical right (Caiani and Cisar 2019). Ensuing political turmoil, which affected centre-right parties, has given an advantage to their competitors on the far right, especially those linking traditional right-wing positions with populist rhetoric. While, in some cases, these parties and movement organizations also complain about the limits of representative democracy, both

their internal practices and their proposals for change differ from those of the progressive movement parties. First and foremost, the radical right movement parties have linked the socio-economic crisis to the opening of borders and the alleged threat that migrants pose to national identity (Wodak 2015). While criticizing the establishment and the ‘old parties’, right-wing movement parties support conservative and authoritarian values, singling out groups of citizens (particularly migrants and other minorities) who should be excluded from the definition of ‘the people’.

In general, the very conception of relations of the parties with social movements is different from the one we find on the left, as they tend to be either seen as subordinated to the party hierarchy or kept at some distance, while the linkages between parties and movements are often less explicit and more contested on the right than on the left. With some exceptions, the substitutive relationship between the electoral and the protest arenas that has been noted on the right but not on the left (Hutter 2014: 138–139) has, if not hampered, certainly shaped the interactions between movements and parties.

Movements and parties on the right also differ from those on the left both in terms of content of their criticism of liberal democracy and in terms of their internal organizational structures, which build upon strong and personalized leadership rather than on citizens’ participation. As research has demonstrated, the anti-gender movement, which claims to defend freedom of speech, thought and conscience, has politicized religious actors and discourse, targeted women’s and LGBT rights and attacked, in particular, sexual and reproductive rights, same-sex marriage, adoption by same-sex parents, sexual education, the protection of women and gender minorities from violence and new reproductive technologies, as well as what they consider to be sexual permissiveness (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018). Developed within the Catholic Church and promoted by right-wing movement organizations and parties, these ideas have been utilized in the defence of traditional values and identities. In this discursive strategy, the rhetorical toolkit also includes the spreading of fear regarding minority groups, who are portrayed as perpetrators of attacks upon the nation (Stambolis-Ruhstorfer and Tricou 2018). While there is an appeal to ‘the people’ – including at times a call for popular referendums – anti-gender activists promote an exclusive understanding of the people through the binary opposition of good and evil (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018). The claim of resisting attempts to curtail the freedom of speech of a ‘silent majority’, self-represented as victims of discrimination, is accompanied by attacks on equal access to rights by LGBTQ individuals and women, with a rejection even of laws against violence towards women and sexual minorities. While the anti-gender movement has been said to instrumentally adopt protest strategies developed by their adversaries (even copying the carnivalesque atmosphere of Gay Pride), it continues to rely more on lobbying by powerful (often Catholic conservative) associations, as is the case of *La Manif pour tous* in France or the *Sentinelle* in Italy (Stambolis-Ruhstorfer and Tricou 2018). Research on racist and xenophobic movement organizations has pointed towards similar appeals to the people – coupled, however, with hierarchical structures and an exclusivist framing.

In general, while the participatory democracy proposed by progressive social movements points towards horizontal relations with an empowerment of the people, the populist conception put forward by right-wing actors ‘does not require that mass constituencies engage in collective action at all, beyond the individual act of casting a ballot in national elections or popular referendums’; so, right-wing populism ‘typically mobilizes mass constituencies from the top-down behind the leadership of a counter-elite’ (Roberts 2015). While there is also

dissatisfaction on the right with what is seen as an elitist trend, the people are there perceived in an exclusive and nativist form as the *ethnos*, rather than as the empowered citizens that we have seen as at the basis of progressive movements' visions.

While not all far-right social movement organizations use conspiracy theories to support Manichean populist visions, research on anti-vax protests has shown increasing references to the 'secret plots' of all-powerful elites against an ignorant people, which have been spread especially by radical right and ultra-conservative groups (Pirro and Taggart 2022). The pandemic has also been presented as an instrument of evil elites to subjugate the people. The anti-contagion measures (from lockdown to masks) as well as the COVID-19 vaccines have been presented, within schemas drawing on traditional conspiracies, such as the 'great replacement', as instruments through which evil elites promote migration as a means of destroying the white and Christian native population (also consider the QAnon conspiracy, singling out a Satanist plot by small groups of assumedly progressive politicians – from Clinton to Soros – engaging in child sex trafficking). Adapting to pandemic times, the far-right populist conspiracists define the virus as an invention by cosmopolitan elites and the vaccine as an instrument to destroy the native DNA with the aim of triggering a 'great reset' (della Porta 2022).

In sum, far-right social movements have linked their traditional nativist and authoritarian frames with a Manichean opposition between powerful elites and an amorphous people. In this sense, far-right populism incorporates rhetorical tropes to further rather anti-democratic aims. The people are here seen, as in the strategic definition of populism, as deprived of agency. In pandemic times, the conspiratorial imaginary rooted in the far-right spectrum has been revitalized in regressive anti-vax protests where a global elite is accused of having invented the COVID-19 virus to subjugate even further the masses that accept to be deprived of liberties.

CONCLUSION

In this contribution we point at the potential improvement of our understanding of important recent developments that can come from more systematic interactions between social movement and populism studies. From an analytic standpoint, we suggest that studies on populism can stimulate social movement scholars to pay more attention to the social construction of 'the people' during protest actions. In parallel, populist studies could learn from social movement studies how to analyse the framing of 'the people' by activists and the linkages between the identification of the self as 'people' with oppositional and motivational frames.

Empirically, social movement scholars have addressed the definition of 'the people' and of popular sovereignty on the left and on the right of the political spectrum, combining attention to framing and to practices during contentious politics. Looking at framing processes, we point at the different relations towards democracy in progressive and regressive movements as linked to the definition of 'the people', but also at the different conceptualizations of the relations between the elites and the rank and file within social movement organizations.

A more systematic effort in this direction seems even more important in times of much intensity, characterized by multiple crises. In particular, the pandemic crisis, in conjunction with related social crises but also with the environmental crisis and now with war, have been addressed through a mobilization of progressive and regressive social movements that have claimed to act 'in the name of the people' against a 'global elite'. To understand the potential impacts of contentious politics in these critical junctures, the analysis of the way in which

the people and the elites are framed in these different protests needs to be combined with the analysis of the changing organizational forms and the repertoire of actions within contentious politics.

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24. Populist leadership and charisma

William Mazzarella

INTRODUCTION

Comparing the enthusiasms driving Donald Trump's presidency to those that powered George Washington's in an earlier moment of American crisis, the historian David Bell remarks, 'Trump's base [is] tied to him by one of the most remarkable charismatic relationships in American history' (Bell 2020).

I would wager that many people reading this sentence will both nod in recognition and feel unsure that they could really explain it. Charisma is one of the most notoriously slippery concepts in social theory, and yet we all have an intuitive sense of what it means. Or perhaps better, what it feels like. Depending on whom you consult, charisma pertains to the stability of the sacred and to the aura of moral order (Eisenstadt 1968; Shils 1965, 1968) – or it is a revolutionary, world-changing force (Bensman and Givant 1975; Stutje 2012). Charisma is an inherent and irreducible property of certain people, places or things – or it is completely contextual and perspectival, a matter of 'you had to be there' (Camic 1980; Smith 2021). Is charisma a power or is it a relation? Is it a substance or an experience?

Widespread recent interest in populism, another notoriously slippery concept, has returned our attention to charisma as well. Especially those scholars that understand populism as a power-gaining strategy have argued that charisma is emblematic, if not definitive, of populist leadership (Andrews-Lee 2021; Kenny 2019; Urbinati 2019; Weyland 2017). But if charisma is the secret sauce of populism, then in these writings both terms tend to be prejudicially deployed. Charisma is too often reduced to personalistic, affect-intensive leadership, populism to an illiberal mutation of democracy. The normative diagnosis that emerges from this lamentable lamination is always negative, the prognosis catastrophic.

So why, then, am I approaching charisma through Trump, a man who is virtually a living ideal type of personality-based, norm-eroding, illiberal populism? Would it not make more sense to mobilize examples of non-personalized charisma, or instances of progressive populism? My approach is based on two assumptions. First, that we can usefully modify the near-hegemonic assumption that charisma is a function of social crisis by proposing that charisma is an ordinary feature of social life that takes on an exceptional, evental quality during moments of transition and rupture. This is why figures like Trump are in fact less symptomatic of exceptional circumstances than of long-standing but ordinarily effaced dynamics. My second assumption is that, once we've registered a connection between charisma and populism, it then makes sense to broaden our view, such that the formally and normatively political question of charisma – Is it good or is it bad for democracy? – can give way to a different kind of question: What can thinking charisma tell us about the grounds of social life as such? It follows that just as I believe that a figure of Trump has something to tell us about political life *tout court*, so I think that populism is of less interest as a normative question for democracy than as a reminder that our political life depends on, as it were, infra-political energies and

attachments. And charisma is one of the names we give to the palpable activation of those energies and attachments.

The concept of charisma is, one might say, itself charismatic. Partly because it sometimes seems like a sort of x factor or fifth element, the sense of a *je ne sais quoi* that might help us explain the otherwise inexplicable. But also because of its intense and irreducible moral ambiguity. There is no shortage of attempts to divide ‘good’ charisma from ‘bad’: the revolutionary leader from the sinister demagogue, the shepherd of souls from the maleficent mesmerizer. And yet it seems we cannot have one without the other.

Charisma, as Max Weber would have it, is ‘the specifically creative revolutionary force of history’, a force that ‘transforms all values and breaks all traditional and rational norms’ (Weber 1978 [1922]: 1117, 1115). At the same time, in Edward Shils’ influential reading, charisma seems to emanate from everything that is most holy, everything that brings us into contact with the “vital layer” of reality’ (Shils 1965: 201). Does that vital layer ensure social order or open onto revolutionary change? Writing at the dawn of the modern state in the seventeenth century, Thomas Hobbes drew a direct line from what we might now call charisma to sedition, and from there, by analogy, to sorcery: ‘the Popularity of a potent Subject, (unlesse the Common-Wealth have very good caution of his fidelity,) is a dangerous disease... And this proceeding of popular, and ambitious men, is plain Rebellion; and may be resembled to the effects of Witchcraft’ (Hobbes 1968 [1651]: 374).

In today’s liberal democracies, not least as they struggle with populist assertions of the ostensibly unmediated sovereignty of the people (the democratic charisma of the multitude rather than the single-point sovereignty of Hobbes’ *Leviathan*), the problem looks a bit different: ‘Is a distinction between democratic charisma and authoritarian charisma needed for a defense of charisma in liberal democracy?’ (Monod 2021: 216). Anticipating my argument in the pages to follow, I will only say at this point that such a distinction may be necessary if what one is after is a *normative* definition of charisma. But the problem – indeed the thing that makes charisma so endlessly absorbing a topic – is that, in the end, such normative distinctions can only be made about particular *outcomes* of charisma rather than about charismatic activation in itself. As T. E. Dow has it: ‘The consequence of forces released by charisma must be evaluated by standards external to those forces themselves’ (Dow 1978: 84).

Some theorists respond to charisma’s many faces by insisting on a reliable and stable definition (Antonakis et al. 2016). Others dismiss it entirely as ‘an utterly useless pseudo-concept or pseudo-psychological figment: it simply names the problem to be solved and the phenomenon to be explained’ (Jameson 2009: 300). My own approach in these pages will be quite different. Against both those who demand simple definitions and those who reject the concept, I take the ambiguity of what we mean when we talk about charisma to be a generative provocation, a signal that something about our ordinary styles of knowing and thinking about social life may not be entirely adequate – especially insofar as we ignore its latent dimensions.

Given Weber’s importance as the inventor of the specifically sociological concept of charisma, I will frequently refer to his ideas (Weber 1978 [1922]: 241–254, 1111–1211). But I do not think we have to use Weber’s formulations as a yardstick of rigour or as an authoritative source against which more informal or popular usages may be evaluated. Nor do I assume that only those phenomena and experiences to which the word was originally or commonly applied count as charisma. I take it, rather, that ‘charisma’ is one (unusually widespread) word that pops up in the proximity of certain kinds of experiences and phenomena that are at once quite familiar and yet also feel extraordinary. Weber is important because he articulated suggestive

ways of thinking about charisma in social theory at a time – the turn of the twentieth century – when a cluster of anxieties about various sorts of uncanny resonance hovered like a cloud over social analysis: crowd energies, mesmeric influence, the affects of ‘primitive’ ritual, the magic of mass media and more (Mazzarella 2017; Wright 2021). Charisma is something of a symptom in Weber’s thought: a place where tensions that are not fully elaborated in his thinking will not leave him alone. Because of the multiple anxious provocation points that fed into Weber’s thinking on charisma, and the way in which the concept was as much a category of religious as political sociology in his work, his formulations remain rich and resonant precisely in their perceptive ambiguity.

In exploring Trumpian charisma, I will be focusing especially on two striking features of charismatic experience. The first is at the centre of Weber’s thinking, namely the ‘anti-economic’ character of charisma – that is to say, its rejection of everyday measures and standards, and the way it requires us to consider human motivations that may have very little to do with the presumption of rational self-interest with which most economists and some political scientists like to work. Weber stressed this anti-economic dimension of charisma, even as he also explored its contribution to intensified economic effort (Weber 2002 [1905]). Second, I will take up an aspect of charisma that Weber (1978 [1922]: 246) hinted at when he said that charisma always appears *in statu nascendi* [in a state of being born], but which has been more extensively developed by psychoanalytic thinkers. This is the idea that charisma involves the affect-intensive activation of desires or images that are socially latent or, in the Freudian sense, unconscious – that is to say, masked in everyday life by repression. Crucially, this implies that we cannot explain charisma simply as the strategic or cynical performance of positions that are already fully known. Rather, there is always something emergent and unpredictable about charismatic activation, something that hovers at the very edge of what we can say at any given moment. This is part of what lends charisma its moral ambiguity and its power.

Quite obviously, Trumpian charisma depended in no small part on the startling abruptness with which Trump transformed what had, until the moment he seized the stage, been considered acceptable behaviour by someone aspiring to the top public office in the United States. Trump’s mode of aggressively irreverent buffoonery (Southall 2020) certainly made a particular kind of symptomatic sense at a time when there was such a yawning gap between the solemn pieties surrounding the dignity of the republic and the realities of extreme poverty and racialized violence. At the same time, Trump crystallized long-standing themes in American public life, including the cult of the narcissistic leader (Deluga 1997; Lunbeck 2017), and an only thinly secularized Evangelical-millennial narrative of manifest destiny (Durbin 2020; Trangerud 2021), a narrative that was, in turn, inseparable from anxieties about faltering white privilege (Hochschild 2018).

Yet my primary aim here is not to make an argument about American politics. Rather, through attention to Trumpian modes of charisma, I am making two interrelated claims. First, that thinking with charisma helps us to understand Trump and Trumpism, and vice versa. Second – more speculatively – that thinking Trumpian charisma helps us to understand something (persistently ambiguous) about social and political life as such. In that sense, Trumpism is neither exceptional nor particular to the United States, nor is it even only a symptom of charismatic populism. At the most general level, I am proposing that one of the things that thinking through charisma helps us to recognize is that social life everywhere and at all times rests on energies that are in themselves amoral, beyond good and evil. Energies in which anxiety is inseparable from enjoyment, fear from fascination.

CHARISMA BEYOND ECONOMY

As Christopher Adair-Toteff (2021) notes, Weber placed a great deal of emphasis on the ‘economically alien’ [*wirtschaftsfremd*] quality of charisma in its ‘pure’ state, which is to say prior to its institutional routinization. Here, Weber was drawing heavily on Rudolf Sohm’s work on ecclesiastical law, in which Sohm mounted a polemical Protestant attack on (what he saw as) the corruption of the early (charismatic) Christian community by means of its institutionalization in the form of the Catholic Church (Haley 1980; Potts 2009; Riesebrodt 1999). The ‘economically alien’ quality of Jesus’ charismatic appeal, which convinced his disciples to forsake their family attachments to follow the Son of God, is summed up in the antinomian formula ‘*it is written, but I say unto you...*’. Robert Yelle (2019) traces the concept of charisma back to an early Pauline distinction between *nomos* (Roman law) and *charis* (the grace of the Gospel), which bequeaths to us an opposition between the authority of prevailing law and the exceptional force of the prophet.

Charisma, then, manifests an authority that has the potential to transcend tradition, prior law and kin ties. In that sense, it is revolutionary and prophetic: at once world-shattering and world-disclosing. The adjective that Weber uses for its extraordinary quality is *ausser-alltäglich*, implying something exceptional, something external to and interruptive of the rhythms, interests and economies of everyday life (Kalyvas 2008). Even in business school leadership theory, which has tried to domesticate and instrumentalize charisma for its own ends, something of this extra-economic dimension persists in the distinction between ‘transactional’ and ‘transformational’ leadership (Bass 1998). The authority of a transactional leader stems from a calculus of mutual advantage between leader and led, whereas a transformational leader inspires their subordinates to see their work as *more than a job*.

However profanely, however chaotically, Trump undoubtedly exuded charisma beyond economy, even as he based some of his appeal to the American electorate on his (notoriously bumpy) record as an entrepreneur. The apparent paradox dissolves once we recognize that Trump’s charisma had far more to do with his ability to *keep himself visible* than with any (questionable) business smarts. His refusal to play by the rules of the presidential game, the curious redemption of his incompetence as a kind of untrammelled immediacy and authenticity; all of this was ratings gold, keeping Trump’s foes as much as his fans glued to their screens.

Some have argued that this kind of mass-mediated, hyper-commodified charisma (after all, Trump was a consumer brand before he was a (non-)politician) can only ever be ‘pseudo-charisma’, because it is, supposedly, rationally planned by spin doctors and marketing mavens. Bensman and Givant, for example, take this line in the name of Weberian orthodoxy: ‘To the extent that the evocation of charisma is the result of rational calculation, and that planning may create the image of a warm, sincere, emotional or “genuine” personality, it violates the original criterion that charisma is irrational or nonrational’ (Bensman and Givant 1975: 604). But one of the lessons of the Trump presidency was that improvisation and hyper-mediation are by no means incompatible. It was precisely on those occasions when Trump was forced to follow a script – for example, when he was reading from a teleprompter or obviously bowing to the advice of his media handlers – that his charisma palpably wilted. Again, the *emergent* quality of charisma – on which more in a moment – means that it is, inherently, performatively contingent. No amount of brand planning or message scripting will ensure that the charismatic effect will appear. More broadly, as I have argued elsewhere, rec-

ognizing this also means acknowledging that *all* publicity – whether commercial or political (and is anyone sure they can tell the difference?) – depends on contingencies of resonance that are unknowable in advance (Mazzarella 2003, 2017, 2020). Conversely, the idea that we should dismiss mass-mediated charisma as inauthentic also ignores the fact that it makes little sense to dismiss whatever it is in us that responds to a charismatic provocation as inauthentic, although it may well in retrospect feel unfortunate or even evil. Here, David Aberbach’s formula for the experience of false prophecy is apt: ‘Though the man was a fake, the longing was real’ (Aberbach 2021: 147).

Charismatic leaders are often imagined as master manipulators. But did Trump consciously know what he was doing at the level of strategy? Was he not perhaps more of a political *idiot savant*, uncannily skilled at sensing the mood of a crowd and actualizing its latent currents from moment to moment? Indeed, part of the fascination of Trump as a public figure was the impression that he altogether lacked interiority – lacked, that is, self-reflection, considered intention, conscience and all the other features of Protestant subjectivity that have been secularized as the norms and forms of liberal citizenship (Keane 2007; Yelle 2019). In that sense, Trump’s charisma was all about the external drama of untrammelled action – even as he and his administration seemed to have an exceptionally hard time pushing through their marquee initiatives. The storming of the United States Capitol by a crowd of Trump supporters on 6 January 2021 was a logical culmination of this longing for untrammelled action, as much as the aimlessness of the insurrectionists, once inside the *sanctum sanctorum*, was consistent with a fixation on *presence* above all else.

This touches on another commonly cited characteristic of charismatic authority: its reliance on the kind of superefficacious results that, when it comes to prophets, are sometimes called miracles. The intensity of commitment that Trump’s base brought to his campaign has often been metaphorized as religious (Jacobs 2018), but it is important to remember that a good third of the people who voted Trump into office were in fact Evangelical Christians. This may itself seem unlikely, as Bell (2020) muses: ‘Has there ever been a more perfect walking embodiment of the seven deadly sins?’. The logic here seems to be that sin is closer to grace than it is to reason.¹ The moral drama of the sin-grace-sin dialectic certainly has a charismatic potential that ‘reasonable’ career politicians like Trump’s successor Joe Biden cannot hope to match.

Still, the prophet who fails his followers, warns Weber, will soon be rejected or worse. So how was Trump’s popularity able to survive, even to thrive, amid the countless scandals and non-achievements that marked his presidency? Why would so many people continue to believe in Trump when he was so demonstrably a compulsive liar? Here it is perhaps less relevant to ask, along with every other incredulous liberal, whether Trump’s followers really *believed* in his claims than to explore the ways in which they *enjoyed* him (Mazzarella 2020). This also helps us to understand why fact-checking, itself an important modality of liberal enjoyment, gained so little traction against Trumpism; the currency of Trumpian charisma was elation rather than facts. As Sverre Spoelstra observes, ‘Trump’s infamous campaign promise to “lock up” Hillary Clinton if elected was hardly meant to be believed – it was primarily an attempt to create an image of himself as someone whose power stands above the law’ (Spoelstra 2019). Such a *primal master*, even in buffoonish guise, is by definition both exciting and appalling.

At this point we might usefully introduce another term: *participation*. By ‘participation’ I mean something much deeper than the usual sense in which the word is used in democratic theory to suggest active involvement in an institutional democratic process. Charismatic participation involves an elated experience of shared bodily substance. In that sense, a charismatic

relationship always involves an experience of immediacy, of direct and substantial relationship in which the lines between the participants (in this case leader and followers) blurs or even dissolves. To say that Trump's followers enjoyed him is also to say that, with a profound sense of vindication, they *enjoyed themselves in him*. And that the attacks of Trump's critics (which involved their own kinds of enjoyment) only escalated the participatory charismatic enjoyment of his followers. As a Trump voter in Colorado told Peter Hessler, a reporter for *The New Yorker*: 'I've never been this emotionally invested in a political leader in my life... The more they hate him, the more I want him to succeed. Because what they hate about him is what they hate about me' (Hessler 2017: 26).

To think participation in this way makes sense, too, in terms of the Christian genealogy of the concept of charisma. It was the disciple Paul who turned the prevailing meaning of 'charism' as a divine gift of grace into the mark of the Christian community as a *shared body* – at once physical, spiritual and political. 'From inception (or invention), then,' remarks Raphael Falco, 'the charisms were components in a hierarchical order designed to promulgate a centralized and personalized authority... The Pauline congregation is both egalitarian and hierarchical, led from below and governed from above' (Falco 1999: 74, 76). The ritual of communion signifies and induces this mutual participation between shepherd and flock: 'A balance, or dialectic, develops between [the] leader's body as flesh and the leader's body as symbol of charismatic unity' (Falco 1999: 77).

The medieval doctrine of royal authority – the king's two bodies – extended this hierarchical bodily mutuality between sovereign and subjects into a feudal political theology. The dawn of popular sovereignty, otherwise known as the coming of modern democracy, did not just (superficially) secularize political authority but also, more fundamentally, inscribed a permanent question mark over the capacity of any one body, human or otherwise, to gather and focus the charismatic energy of the collective (Frank 2021; Lefort 1988; Santner 2011). Little wonder, then, that the political history of charisma after the democratic revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries should appear as a queasy chronicle of revenance, see-sawing between authoritarian masters and mass uprisings.

CHARISMA AS ACTIVATION

What tools do we have for digging deeper into this kind of participatory enjoyment when it comes to a leader like Trump? In broad strokes, we could say that such enjoyment involves a double dynamic: identification and activation. And this, in turn, moves us into more psychoanalytically informed territory.

In the wake of Freud's groundbreaking characterization of the mass leader as a return of the (murdered) primal father (Freud 1990 [1921]), some psychoanalytic explanations of charisma have argued that the identification between leader and led is grounded in shared narcissistic injury (Aberbach 1996; Kohut 1973, 1978; Maccoby 2003). The idea here is that a narcissistic wound causes the leader relentlessly to seek the love and affirmation of his followers (witness Trump's addiction, even after he was elected, to mega rallies where he could bask in the adulation of his fans). At the same time, the leader's wound mirrors those of their followers, except that the followers are seeking in the leader the ego-ideal (the person they would like to be) that they cannot realize in themselves. Hence the extraordinarily powerful seduction of Trump's seeming invulnerability and non-accountability; for his followers, it was an opportunity to

participate in omnipotence. As Trump infamously bragged on the campaign trail: ‘I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot someone, and I wouldn’t lose any voters, OK?’ (Dwyer 2016).

It is not much of a stretch to discern shared narcissistic injuries in Trumpian enjoyment. David Bell offers one interpretation of Trump’s side of the equation: ‘Despite his wealth, he remains in manner and speech the brash outsider – the sort of person (“Donny from Queens”) who is heard on a daily basis phoning in to [right-wing talk show hosts] Rush Limbaugh or Sean Hannity... to rant about the liberal enemy’ (Bell 2020). And on the voter side, a *ressentiment* arising, in part, out of thwarted white masculinity, downward mobility and, more broadly, rage at elite condescension toward those voters that Hillary Clinton so disastrously dismissed as a ‘basket of deplorables’.

Whether or not narcissism is understood as the primary engine of charismatic experience, psychoanalytically inspired studies propose that the uncanny quality of resonant participation that characterizes the charismatic relationship arises out of the activation of unconscious impulses, grounded in repressed and often traumatic conflicts (Aberbach 1996). Many interpretive advantages follow. For example, attending to the unconscious sources of charismatic activation allows us to go beyond the sort of banal culturalism that presumes that a leader’s message resonates simply because it overlaps with the existing beliefs – the ‘culture’, the ‘values’ – of its public. In other words, charismatic resonance cannot, by definition, be only a matter of appealing to something already known. It has, rather, to involve the *transferential* activation of hitherto unarticulated needs and/or conflicts (Stavrakakis and Galanopoulos 2022). That is, too, why even though charismatic authority may in some respects be routinized and institutionalized, as per Weber’s scheme, the core of its power – its *evental drama* – resists routinization. This, by the way, is both the dilemma and the power of ritual, an important technology of the routinization *and* the activation of charisma: the paradox of re-enacting a sublime and singular event, where ritual action is at once repetition and reanimation.

By grounding charismatic resonance (at least in part) in unconscious conflicts, psychoanalytic thinking also helps us to understand the curious affective *intensity* of charismatic experience: the way it is often described as life-changing or as a decisive break with prior assumptions (again, ‘I’ve never been this emotionally invested in a political leader in my life’). Psychoanalysis provides one set of concepts by which we can distinguish the different kinds of needs involved in different sorts of charismatic relationships (Camic 1980), for example, the difference between ego-ideal needs (a masterful leader), superego needs (a sacred leader) and id needs (a transgressive leader).

If “‘charisma” designates the force of the externalized unconscious tendencies which slip into awareness in the guise of an external force’, and if the ‘aura of magic springs from the resonance between what is perceived to be the external reality and the unconscious thought which is the real source of the experience’ (McIntosh 1970: 902), then we have a plausible way of thinking about why charismatic encounters seem so often to involve something like telepathy or precognition (‘He knew what I was thinking before I did’). Freud’s foundational insight that attachment is at its very root ambivalent – and that the more intense it is the more ambivalent it is also likely to be – helps us to make sense of why apparently repulsive or deeply flawed people can become adored leaders. Charismatic attraction does not depend on moral approval. Indeed, in the charismatic scenario, it may be that the person credited with the greatest charisma is the one that most comprehensively allows for an activation of conflicts that go way deeper than considerations of good and evil. Indeed, here is another reason why

the enjoyment of charismatic leaders (as opposed to a ‘belief’ in them) seems so often to hover in an indeterminate territory that involves both vitalization and self-destruction. As one Trump voter told a *Guardian* reporter, ‘If I have to lose it all, I need for him to win’ (McCarthy 2017). Psychoanalysis thus gives us some relief from the anxious imperative to distinguish ‘good’ charisma from ‘bad,’ recognizing instead that they come from the same places and that they are ever liable to morph into one another in uncanny ways.

Tellingly, psychoanalysts’ relation to the question of charisma is itself deeply ambivalent, pointing as it does to something potentially troubling and deeply ambivalent in the transference dynamics of psychoanalytic therapy – the spectre of magical suggestion or manipulative influence that, for Freud, still haunted the hypnotic techniques with which he started his practice (Freud 1966 [1917]: 558–559; Lunbeck 2021). But one might argue, perhaps, that the very intimacy of the problem for psychoanalytic practice, coupled with a commitment to working through symptoms, has allowed psychoanalytic thinkers to grasp dynamics that continue to elude (and sometimes delude) other theorists of charisma.

Still, one does not have to accept all the premises of psychoanalysis in order to acknowledge that charismatic experience involves the activation of latent psychosocial materials. Weber seems to have had something along those lines in mind when he wrote that charisma ‘revolutionizes men “from within”’ (Weber 1978 [1922]: 1116). It also means that we should be sceptical of the frequent claim, in scholarly analyses of charismatic leadership, that charismatic authority is ‘unmediated’ or ‘immediate’. The grounds of the charismatic effect may be latent (until their charismatic activation), but they do comprise a kind of archive – what I have elsewhere called a *mimetic archive* (Mazzarella 2017). As such, charisma arises out of specific mediations, but they are not the mediations we conventionally understand by words like ‘culture’, ‘ideology’, ‘symbolic order’ and so on. The latency of this archive means both that charisma generally appears in a mode of surprise and novelty, and that there is nothing given or necessary about a charismatic event. Philip Smith notes:

The alignment of meanings, performances, events, and interpretations is a source of contingencies that see charismatic power come and go. Objective historical events, technologies and their control, public gatherings, animal magnetism, and embodied contacts are affordances. Perhaps they offer the necessary but not sufficient conditions for charismatic power to emerge. And perhaps not even that. (Smith 2021: 19)

After Trump was declared the winner of the 2016 presidential election, psephologists and pundits scrambled to claim that his victory, so unexpected to the experts, could have been predicted had we only been asking the right questions of the right people in the right places. However, it seems clear that Trump himself, along with most members of his campaign team, was as surprised by his victory as his harshest critics were (Wolff 2018). More generally, one of the provocations of charisma is that it calls into question a faith in prediction as such. Many social scientists have argued that the characteristic charismatic element of ‘baffling success’ is only baffling relative to the inadequacy of our empirical and conceptual tools (Joose 2014). But I would argue that the latency – or, in the Freudian sense, the unconsciousness – of the grounds of charisma mean that there is always something about charismatic events – and here, Barack Obama’s election to the United States presidency in 2008 is as good an example as Donald Trump’s in 2016 – that resists prediction. This is because the causal factors are not, as it were, actualized and thus not available to ordinary empirical observation before the decisive moment in which they make all the difference. This is also the reason that Trump is not simply

‘politically incorrect’. It is not just that he says what others are afraid to say. It’s also that he is – ‘miraculously’ – able to say what others didn’t even know they wanted to say – and often, I suspect, what even *he* didn’t know he wanted to say... until he said it.

CONCLUSION

A certain melodrama clings to charisma as a concept in political analysis, a whiff of appalling atavisms and totalitarian *teloi*. During the early days of the Trump presidency, a direct line was often drawn under the sign of fascism from national socialism to Trumpism. Certainly, the Trump administration evinced fascistoid characteristics, and the sense of barely suppressed mass violence that always simmered at his rallies was ominous indeed. But to reduce the study of charisma to regressive unreason or to incipient fascism is to miss the deeper insights into social process that it invites.

This is the major problem with many mainstream liberal critics of Trumpian charisma, and of charisma in general, who see in it only unreason, and in unreason only falsehood:

Post-truth is pre-fascism, and Trump has been our post-truth president. When we give up on truth, we concede power to those with the wealth and charisma to create spectacle in its place... Post-truth wears away the rule of law and invites a regime of myth... Truth is to be replaced by spectacle, facts by faith. (Snyder 2021).

These words were published in the immediate aftermath of the 6 January storming of the United States Capitol, an event that triggered a mass, almost completely unreflective journalistic countermobilization of the nineteenth-century language of the *mob* as the very embodiment of violent unreason (Borch 2012; Laclau 2005; Mazzarella 2010).

As much as one might sympathize with the sense of alarm, this kind of framing of charisma confuses its grounds (which it does not understand) with its effects (which it simply presumes). But as Charles Camic remarks: ‘The ultimate effect of charisma depends on countless non-charismatic factors – a point so obvious that it is often forgotten’ (Camic 1980: 20). If we are to redeem charisma as an object of analysis, then it is not by celebrating its beneficent potential against its dark side, but rather by exploring what it may teach us about the latent or unconscious dimensions of social life as such. This requires that we let go of the liberal investment in simply holding the line against the non-rational dimensions of politics, and inquire instead into how non-rational and largely unconscious attachments also power whatever values each of us hold most dear. This does not mean that normative distinctions become irrelevant or impossible. Rather, it means that we separate those normative distinctions from their infra-normative grounds, and then review the normative distinctions in light of what we have learned.

In the end, this is what the experience of charisma points to: the activation of latent conflicts and attachments whose relation to our conscious commitments and enjoyments has much to teach us. Donald McIntosh expressed it admirably half a century ago:

The ability to tap these forces lies behind everything that is creative and constructive in human action, but also behind the terrible destructiveness of which humans are capable. White and black magic have the same source. In the social and political realm, there is no power to match that of the leader who is able to evoke and harness the unconscious resources of his followers. (McIntosh 1970: 902–903)

NOTE

1. Thanks to Amy McLachlan (personal communication) for this formulation.

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25. Populist political communication

Niko Hatakka

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses research that approaches populism as a phenomenon directly related to political communication. First, the chapter introduces readers to how researchers have evaluated the role of communication for populism and for populism research. Therefore, the first section discusses how the different definitions of populism have affected the extent to which political communication has been viewed as pertinent for its study. The second section introduces the theoretical and methodological mainstream of populist political communication studies that relies on the so-called ideational approach. The section describes mainstream populist political communication studies' theoretical premises, most-used methodologies, typologies and core findings. Third, the chapter introduces new approaches to populist political communication studies that rely more on discourse-theoretical aspects of populism theory. The fourth section presents emerging and unexplored avenues for research. Last, the concluding section takes stock to provide an overview of populist political communication as a sub-discipline of populism studies in the 2020s and suggests avenues for future research.

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND POPULISM STUDIES

Communication, as a research perspective or as an object of study, has gradually become more central in the field of populism studies. However, political communication has not always been viewed as necessarily relevant for researching populism and its actors. Especially the mainstream of populism studies, primarily the so-called ideational approach, was originally most interested in the thin-ideological underpinnings and characteristics shared by populist parties. The ideational approach has particularly relied on Cas Mudde's definition, which suggests that populism is 'a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people' (Mudde 2004: 543). Viewing populism as a set of ideas suggests that all populist actors share a common thin-centred ideological core regardless of their policies or ideological shades (e.g. Hawkins 2018: 69). Ideational researchers have contributed significantly to the field by describing how populism could be theorized as an ideational ontology, what populist ideas are and what are their characteristics and which actors can be regarded to host such ideas. Yet, the approach did not initially appear very much interested in enquiring *how populist ideas were being communicated*.

The view of populism as ideational content has since inspired the systematic *analysis of populist ideas in discourse*, or in other words, the pursuit of classifying primarily textual data to inquire to what extent texts and their writers host populist ideas and which populist ideas they host. Analysis of populist discourse has been undertaken notably by the teams of

Kirk Hawkins and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (e.g. 2019), among others. Their premise is discourse analytical, meaning that by analysing sets of texts one may observe, for example, to what extent and how texts reflect populism as a thin-centred ideology. The emergence of the typologies and methodologies for analysing populist ideas in texts have made it evident that – even though discourse might no longer be viewed by ideational scholars as the source of populism as a phenomenon – the study of language and the use of broad genres of texts for qualitative and mixed-methods research have become increasingly relevant in the field.

Another vital approach for the emerging study of populist political communication was the theoretical insight provided by researchers who approached *populism as a political style and performance*. The approach has stressed the performative aspects of the populist actors, focusing not on what populist ideas per se are but on populism as symbolic performance of aesthetics, style and non-verbal elements of communication in the (mass) media (Moffitt 2016; Moffitt and Tormey 2014). The political style approach has been key in bringing in the aspect of populism as being something ‘that is being done’ (Moffitt 2016: 22; 2018: 3) instead of as something ‘that is’ – suggesting that the focus of populism research could be readjusted. Rather than focusing on evaluating the extent to which populist ideas are *reflected* in discourse, analysis of populism as a political style directs the analytical focus on how populism is contextually and (often) deliberately constructed in the public sphere. On the surface, the epistemic difference between the analysis of populist ideas and style may appear superficial, but it is important as the stylistic/performative approach brings the idea of mediation into the field of analysis, suggesting that populism, in a sense, comes alive via the transferring of meaning (see also Laclau 2005), that is, communication. Therefore, describing populism as something that ‘is being done’ has paved the way not only for the analysis of, for example, the rhetorical and performative aspects of political leadership around the world, but also encouraged the conceptualization of populism as ‘an expression of political communication content and style’ (de Vreese et al. 2018).

Despite Jan Jagers and Stefaan Walgrave (2007: 322) describing populism as a ‘communication frame that appeals to and identifies with the people and pretends to speak in their name’ already in the mid-2000s, *populist political communication* as a conceptualization and a key object of study did not fully emerge until the mid-2010s. Pioneers in this new field have been primarily cross-disciplinary scholars, media scholars and communication scientists, especially from Amsterdam, Zürich and Vienna. In their influential article, Claes de Vreese and his colleagues (2018) combine theoretical insights from the ideational and the political style approaches to suggest that populist political communication consists of the expression of both ideational and stylistic components of populism. Their target of analysis therefore focuses on how communication is used to disseminate and perform populist ideas and style on various platforms by various actors, not just by populists. Another recent seminal piece of research edited by Toril Aalberg and her colleagues (2017) took stock to analyse and to review the manifestations of populist political communication and the relationship of populism and the media in different European countries. The book was largely a result of the COST network ‘Populist Political Communication in Europe’ (2014–2018) led by Aalberg and de Vreese, and the work done within the network accelerated research that not only theorized populist political communication but also operationalized it in dozens of pieces of empirical research (e.g. Reinemann et al. 2019). The approach has focused especially on analysing the salience, platforms and effects of populist political communication. The research objects, methods and results of this approach are addressed later in this chapter.

Despite scholars of populist political communication having found their theoretical camp mostly in the ideational approach, the role of Ernesto Laclau's (2005) theory of populism must be acknowledged when discussing the study of populist political communication. Even though the mainstream of populist political communication studies can be described primarily as the pursuit of analysing the mediated communication of populist ideas and style, populist political communication as a research perspective can provide an empirical way to analyse populism as described by Laclau, that is as a discursive process of political articulation. Compared to the ideational and stylistic approaches, this discourse-theoretical approach has had a different view on populism. The so-called Laclauian approach sees populism as something that 'does' instead of something that 'is' or something that 'is done'. Thus, the approach refers to populism as a political logic for the discursive articulation of social relations (Laclau 2005). Therefore, what 'populism does' is that it articulates societal demands into chains of equivalence, or discursively formed in- and out-groups, via meaning-making practices (see Stavrakakis 2017). Sometimes the formation of in- and out-groups is the result of intentional and coordinated efforts of political communication, but sometimes political alliances and animosities just seem to emerge organically, when certain signifiers (such as political leaders, symbols or, for example, hashtags) start to accumulate meanings that bind societal demands together and simultaneously start to put them at odds against other sets of discursively bound demands (e.g. Palonen 2018).

If we look at populist political communication through the theoretical lens of the ideational approach, we are likely to view, for example, how populist ideas manifest in texts and other acts of communication. But if we view populist political communication through Laclauian post-foundational lenses, we are likely to capture how the use of language not only reflects political ideas but also articulates them together to form imagined communities such as 'the people' and 'the elite' – or whatever label the communities contextually obtain via signification. Despite the clear theoretical connections pertaining to language and discourse being central to both Laclauian theory and populist political communication studies, the discourse-theoretical approach has not been widely engaged within research that conceptually deals specifically with populist political communication. However, the approaches that regard populism as discursive performance, style and communication do engage with the overall research problem pertaining to the discursive construction and dissemination of populist ideas, and they do so with greater specificity than Laclau. In a later section of this chapter, I will return to this to present how the discourse-theoretical approach has been and could be adopted in the sub-field of populist political communication studies.

POPULIST POLITICAL COMMUNICATION STUDIES

Based on the ideational approach and the stylistic approach, researchers especially from media and communication studies have developed conceptualizations and empirical methodologies for studying the specificity of *populist political communication*. Similarly to the ideational approach, definitions of populist political communication aim to be minimalist: straightforward, simple and sufficiently comprehensive without the imminent danger of conceptual overreach. In the definition suggested by Carsten Reinemann and his colleagues (2017: 14–24), the communicative construction of 'the people' is the most central feature of populist political communication, followed by secondary features like anti-elitism and the exclusion

of out-groups. It is debatable whether highlighting the exclusion of out-groups is a necessary condition for tracking down all ideological varieties of populism in texts, as doing so might overstate the salience of populist communication by particular kinds of populist actors, especially by those from the far right (de Cleen et al. 2018). According to de Vreese et al. (2018), populist political communication consists of acts of communication that contain elements of the thin-ideological core of populism and of (verbal or non-verbal) expressions of populist style. Therefore, according to them, populism is the expression of both (populist) ideational content and style, providing a wider conceptualization compared to that of Reinemann et al. (2017). Despite these oft-cited definitions having provided a starting point for many studies in populist political communication, in practice, most studies in the field seem to follow the definitions more as guidelines rather than as rigid norms for the operationalization of research.

Like the other text-focused sub-fields of populism studies, populist political communication studies suggest that an actor's populist characteristics can be better mapped on a sliding scale rather than on the basis of actors being categorized binarily as populist or non-populist (e.g. de Cleen et al. 2018). Also, as populist political communication manifests actively in language and discursive interactions rather than passively in, for example, political values and attitudes, the status of the actors engaging in populist political communication is less relevant for its research. Thus, the study of populist communication is not only about the study of communication by populists, but by all actors contributing to populist discourse in the public sphere. Therefore, instead of focusing on the communication of individual populist actors or party families, such as the populist radical right, populist political communication scholars have engaged primarily in researching mass communication, for example in the contexts of print media (Wettstein et al. 2018a), television (Ernst et al. 2019) and digital media (Engesser et al. 2017; Ernst et al. 2017).

The argument for the necessity of an analysis of populist political communication is based on the following premise: for populist actors to attract constituencies who will support populist ideas they must be able to communicate their message to potential supporters in the public sphere (Reinemann et al. 2017; de Vreese et al. 2018). Also, the availability of populist political communication within the information system may produce certain outcomes, such as affecting people's reality perception, emotions, identity and political behaviour (Reinemann et al. 2017: 22–23). Therefore, by analysing the salience of populist political communication in the public sphere, research has provided much insight regarding, for example, to what extent populist ideas and style are available for consumption by the public via older and newer media, and thus to what extent populist actors could reach potential voters. Also, the approach has allowed to inquire, for example, who are communicating populist ideas and style, on what platforms populist communicators prefer to do so and whether media systems favour actors who engage in and with populist political communication.

Despite de Vreese et al. (2018) suggesting that populist political communication includes the expression of both populist ideas and stylistic components, fewer quantitative studies have operationalized the populist style in their analysis (see, e.g. Wettstein et al. 2018b). Therefore, most of the empirical work on populist political communication has close similarities to the analysis of populist ideas in discourse as both approaches have primarily been invested in analysing the salience of populist ideational content in texts. However, there are some differences when comparing the operationalization of populism as a variable in the quantitative analyses of *populist ideas* and of *populist political communication*. For example, Hawkins and Kaltwasser (2017) measure the presence of references to 'a reified popular will' and 'a conspiring elite',

whereas Martin Wettstein and his colleagues (2018a) operationalize their analysis around ‘anti-elitism’ and ‘people-centrism’, as does Paris Aslanidis (2018). There are key differences also within populist political communication studies in terms of how research teams have operationalized the ideational content of populism. Most studies utilize *people-centrism* and *anti-elitism*, but some studies include additional elements: for example, Sven Engesser and his colleagues (2017) add the analysis of ‘demands for the sovereignty of the people’, whereas Michael Hameleers and Rens Vliegenhart (2020) include two additional analytical features to measure the communicative exclusion of out-groups (right- and left-wing variants). In some studies, the categories for anti-elitism, people-centrism, exclusion of out-groups and demands for sovereignty are all divided into multiple text-analytical sub-categories (e.g. Blassnig et al. 2019).

In terms of methodology, studies of populist political communication have mostly used quantitative content analysis or mixed methods, combining quantitative content analyses with qualitative methodologies. A majority of populist political communication studies have utilized a text-as-data approach, and there have been a few studies that employ other social science methods or non-natural textual data, such as interviews. However, not all studies on political communication rely entirely on text analysis. For example, Philipp Müller and his colleagues (2017) and Michael Hameleers (2020) have employed experimental research designs to analyse the effects of populist political communication. Surveys have also been used to investigate whether individuals’ consumption of types of media that contain more populist political communication correlates with their propensity to hold populist attitudes (Hameleers et al. 2017a). Nevertheless, studies that analytically explore the societal impact and dynamics of populist political communication beyond its immediate textual manifestations remain rare.

In terms of implementation, research teams doing quantitative content analysis of populist political communication have coded their textual datasets either manually (e.g. Blassnig et al. 2019), or by using automated or semi-automated dictionary-based approaches (e.g. Hameleers and Vliegenhart 2020) – or a combination of these methods. Several studies have used topic modelling to analyse communication by populists (e.g. Puschmann et al. 2020), but artificial intelligence-based computational analysis of populist communication remains to be developed. In quantitative populist political communication studies, the dependent variables often are the defined elements of populist political communication, which are then analysed against independent variables of various types. Among popular independent variables coded in such studies are country setting, speaker, communication platform or type of media, and time.

The genres of texts used in the analysis of populist political communication vary due to the approach’s interest in the communication of all kinds of actors. However, initially researchers of populist political communication focused mainly on populism in the mainstream media, analysing the pervasiveness of populist ideas and style in mainstream journalism (e.g. Wettstein et al. 2018a, 2018b). Most of the studies in the field are comparative studies without a longitudinal perspective. However, some works have measured the salience of populism in texts over long periods of time, mostly in single-country settings. Such studies have employed the communication perspective to measure whether the so-called ‘populist zeitgeist’ (Mudde 2004) holds true in different textual and country contexts. For example, Hameleers and Vliegenhart (2020) analysed the salience of populist communication in Dutch newspapers over a period of nearly three decades using a dictionary-based approach, and Jon Järvinieni (2022) analysed the prevalence and ‘contagion’ of populist political communication in Finnish parliamentary debates from the 2000s to the late 2010s using manual quantitative

content analysis. Another research object has been the analysis of populist communication by the media (Esser et al. 2017: 367–369; see also Hameleers et al. 2017b; Krämer 2014), in which researchers focus on unearthing, for example, aspects of media content and production that seemingly boost the salience of populist political communication – a factor noted over a decade earlier also by Gianpetro Mazzoleni (2003, 2008). Later analyses have focused more on social media platforms and online communication (Engesser et al. 2017), comparing for example, whether different social media favour different elements of populism to be expressed (Ernst et al. 2017).

EMERGING APPROACHES TO POPULIST POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Whereas the majority of studies on populist political communication are quantitative and rather positivist in terms of their research design, the field has lately welcomed more qualitative studies of populist political communication. Despite such works also utilizing text analysis as the primary method, they rarely focus on analysing the salience of populist political communication as such; they are more interested in, for example, interpreting and linking text-analytical findings (that pertain to populist political communication) more closely to their political and other contexts. Such studies have incorporated theory and methods especially from the fields of critical discourse analysis and post-structuralist discourse theory, and they understand populist political communication more broadly when compared to the quantitative mainstream of populist political communication studies. Therefore, qualitative studies are often less bound to minimalist definitions of populist political communication. The broadening of the theoretical scope on populist political communication has been more than welcome, not least because it has allowed the inquiry of new and exciting research problems regarding, for example, the outcomes of populist communication.

From a discourse-theoretical perspective, communication is essential for the emergence and success of historical actors, because discourse and meaning-making are the processes through which collective identities are articulated (Laclau 2005). Similarly, the communication approach to populism suggests that (populist) political actors would struggle to gain any power without being able to convey their appeal via communication and that ‘populist ideas must be communicated discursively to achieve the communicators’ goals and the intended effects on the audience’ (de Vreese et al. 2018: 425). However, there is a clear analytical difference between the ideational and discourse-theoretical approaches: whereas populist political communication is encoded into speech acts (and thus can be analysed in itself), the articulation of a populist movement – in the Laclauian sense – cannot be expected to take place solely via the communication and reception of populist ideas and style.

Thus, argued from a discourse-theoretical perspective, to understand the form, trajectories, successes and failures of populist actors, we cannot just focus on analysing populist political communication and its direct measurable effects on individuals (Hatakka 2019) – regardless of how reliably it could be done. To analyse how we get from populist communicators disseminating populist messages and performing populist style to the articulation of political entities that impact society, both in positive and negative ways, new empirical perspectives for populist political communication research are necessary. As Løne Sorensen (2021) persuasively argues, populist communication should not be researched for *what it is* but for *what*

it does. In other words, communication is interesting in the context of populism because it is the means through which political identities are manifested via the selection, articulation and circulation of culturally and politically resonant symbols and signifiers in the changing media environment.

Therefore, one is to presume that the discursive articulation of viable populist movements is based not only on the contents and socio-cognitive effects of populist political communication but also on discursive interactions about populists and their communication (Hatakka 2019). An emerging key perspective for analysing the dynamics of populist political communication beyond analysing populist communication itself is the research of how political actors, journalists and citizens interact with populist political communication in the public sphere. This is important because the ways in which different actors react to populists and their communication can affect the ways in which populist organizational vehicles are perceived and to what extent they can enact democratic correctives (Eklundh 2020; Hatakka 2019: 80–85). Studies have, for example, analysed the ways in which journalistic and academic texts have used ‘populism’ and ‘populist communication’ as signifiers to make sense of the various phenomena attached to populism and its actors (e.g. De Cleen et al. 2020; Goyvaerts 2021; Goyvaerts and De Cleen 2020). Content analyses have pointed out that populism is being primarily framed as an ideational and far-right phenomenon and that populist political communication is viewed increasingly as a threat (De Cleen et al. 2020; Hatakka and Herkman 2022; Nikisianis et al. 2018). However, the tendency of public discussion to lump together vastly different kinds of political movements under the umbrella of ‘populism’ has been argued to mainstream especially the thicker ideological contents of the populist radical right and of the extreme right, leading to the normalization and trivialization of especially racist and nativist communication in the public sphere (Brown and Mondon 2020; Mondon and Winter 2020).

This argument highlights the need to revisit discussions pertaining to the relationship between populist political communication and the media (e.g. Krämer 2018): for example, is the relationship between mainstream journalism and populist communicators tense because of certain actors’ populism or because of some other characteristics of their communication? If the answer is the latter, or both, then it would be wise to analytically zoom out from researching populist political communication per se through the abstract perspective provided by minimal definitions and instead shift attention to researching how populist political communication is operationalized by political actors to advance contextually changing discourses, claims and demands (Sorensen 2021) – not to forget how the actions of other actors affect their production, circulation and interpretation. A good option for lowering the level of analytical abstraction would be to bring contexts and actors back into populist political communication studies.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: RESEARCHING POPULIST POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN THE 2020s

The sub-field of populist political communication studies has made it possible to analyse how populism is produced, performed and communicated in various publics by various actors. The quantitative communication approach, which has combined core insights from the ideational and stylistic approaches, provides an excellent means for analysing the contents and manifestations of populist discourse in the media. But for us to gain insight about ‘what populism

does' and how the logics of the contemporary media environment affect the articulation of populist movements, discourse theory should be applied further in populist political communication studies. Additionally future studies should further operationalize newer theoretical insights from the field of media and communication studies regarding the rapidly changing communication environment.

As previous populist political communication research has focused on the macro level of mass communication utilizing a minimal definition of populism, it has not been fully able to detect and to conceptualize the contexts, vocabularies and discursive dynamics through which populism is mobilized and made politically alive and relevant. Further theoretical and empirical work should be done especially on the dynamics of communication that take place around 'populist signifiers', that is, the symbols and concepts around which chains of equivalence start to form (Laclau 2005). Such efforts should be made taking heed of the changing context of hybridizing media systems and hybrid media events (Chadwick 2017; Sumiala et al. 2018): after the digitally broadcast and debated tragedies of COVID-19, the Capitol Hill insurgency and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the societal importance of the communicative dynamics pertaining to the emergence of a sense of 'us' and 'them' is likely to be more salient than ever before. Populist political communication research already has solid foundations to contribute further to the study of contemporary political life, but more work remains to be done.

An aspect that should be taken into consideration in future populist political communication studies is the emergence of horizontal, inclusive and accessible means for political communication provided by digital media platforms – and especially how they affect not only the salience of populist political communication but also its effects on the functioning and characteristics of political institutions. If we wish to understand how populist political communication affects the public perception of populist actors and their ability to enact change, we must recognize that this communication takes place in a media system with multiple actors on multiple platforms negotiating meaning interactively. This means that populist parties and movements become attached to contextually relevant ideological systems and discourses via a plethora of individual mediated acts of populist communication, which can vary in their ideological and stylistic content depending on who is speaking and in what context.

While digital channels provide populist institutionalized actors with much-needed resources for communicating their message, they also provide material contexts for surveillance and monitoring – and thus can cause problems for political organizations. Social media have largely democratized the production and circulation of information, meaning that the dissemination of ideas and political styles that appear as anomalous has become significantly easier. Online media platforms not only contribute to the communication between populist politicians and their supporters, but they also allow the communication of institutionally parallel messages in heterogeneous ways. This suggests that, in hybrid media environments, populist political communication should be regarded as hybrid: as a mix of institutional and non-institutional acts of communication that host a variety of thicker ideologies and political styles and that are disseminated both on older and newer media (Hatakka 2019: 59–63).

Despite most populist political communication studies having focused on legacy media, this should not be viewed as a weakness; even though the previously central role of journalism shifted during the first two decades of the 2000s, it has not been overturned. Moreover, instead of focusing fully on online communication, populist political communication studies should actively start to build on its existing research to engage in studying the flows of communication between older and newer media and how they affect the prevalence and impact of

populist political communication. If there is little research on the discursive dynamics between populist communicators and other publics on and offline, there is even less research on the interaction between populist political communication and the practices of political institutions. For example, we know little about how and to what extent the formal and lived organizational practices of populist parties affect the parties' control over party communications that are increasingly done online by non-party elites (e.g. Hatakka 2022; Zulianello 2022). Additionally, despite most studies on populist political communication having been focused on mass communication, the perspective would have interesting applications beyond the contexts of externally oriented political communication and institutional politics – for example, in research on intra-organizational competition and social group dynamics.

Finally, it is worthwhile to highlight the importance of research that would investigate the relationship between populist political communication and the governance of digital media platforms. The Cambridge Analytica scandal of 2017 started an avalanche of public pressure on social media platforms, which has since unleashed a discursive goldmine regarding the accountability of social media platforms and their role as facilitators of unwanted or harmful political activities. Future projects should inquire as to how the rapid changes in various social media services' community guidelines, their constant communication of accountability and direct actions taken to bar certain kinds of communication have affected the salience of populist communication online, and how it has affected populist communicators' access and discourses regarding commercial social media as platforms for political communication. Such an avenue for research could be explored, for example, via a combination of text analysis and research interviews.

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26. Populism and emotions

Emmy Eklundh

INTRODUCTION

Populists are often thought to be more emotional than other political actors. It has been argued that they play on the fears and insecurities of ordinary people to offer simple solutions to difficult problems. In the wake of the tumultuous pandemic years, populists have been labelled as behaving badly (Tisdall 2020) but, even before that, so-called populist politics has been called ‘insane’ by political commentators (Rauch 2016). Are they? In order to answer this question, this chapter will engage with how populist politics, and more broadly resistance to the political status quo, has a long history of being labelled as mad, pathological and insane. The chapter will engage with how this notion has permeated much scholarship until quite recently, but also point to how emotions and affect have experienced a revival in recent years, where the presence of emotions in politics is automatically equated with a threat to the political order. The chapter will conclude that while emotions and affect are considered more important now than before, there is still a long way to go to recognize that emotions constitute a central and inevitable part of all political life.

THE MAD POPULISTS

The reluctance to recognize populists as ‘proper’ political actors today draws on a long tradition of exclusionary thought in social and political theory. Importantly, the rhetoric used against populists today stems from a long-held belief that rationality and democracy are joined together at the hip, and that in order to participate in political life, citizens must be capable of rational thought. This axiom, however, must be situated within the empirical context in which it was developed. Much of what we rely on today is built on work done by French crowd theory as developed in the nineteenth century. At the time, scholars such as Tarde, Taine and later Le Bon (Le Bon 1960) were arguing that when citizens partook in political protest, their mental faculties were compromised. This thinking must be paired with the significant upheavals of the time. In the wake of industrialization, many workers had moved from agrarian communities into metropolitan areas where factory work was available but the quality of life was squalid, and conditions were ripe for a call to an increase of political rights. At the time, since neither men without property nor women were allowed to vote, strikes and street protest became common repertoires of action in order to enact political change. It is in this context that the labelling of resistance as pathology emerges. Protesters were not only thought of as criminal, but also as mentally unstable, which served a political purpose to discredit any movements against the status quo.

The work of crowd theorists has had a profound impact on how political behaviour has been studied within political and social theory. Le Bon’s insights have been appropriated by, for instance, Schumpeter, who argued that any citizen involved in protest ‘drops down to a lower

level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyses in a way which he would readily recognise as infantile within the sphere of his real interests. He becomes a primitive again' (Schumpeter 1976: 262). Schumpeter uses this perspective to justify limits on political participation for the masses. Similar thoughts can be found in the work of Smelser (1968), who argued that emotions are incompatible with rationality, and therefore with political life. Furthermore, similar thoughts underpin Almond and Verba's civic culture, where uncivilized behaviours, such as invectives or incensed speech, were deemed unsuitable for any democratic development (Almond and Verba 1963). Even key democratic theorists such as Held (1987: 165) echo this when discussing the problems of political participation and draw parallels between expanded voting rights and the election of Hitler. Universal suffrage comes with a constant warning, that the hearts and minds of the general public may not be suited to elect good representatives, a problem already identified by John Stuart Mill centuries ago (Held 1987: 170).

One could argue that these sentiments are outdated and patently inaccurate, but they have a significant impact on today's discussion of populism. The emotional aspect of populist politics is often seen as a pathology, not an asset to political life. As a result, although populism studies are increasingly turning the focus towards the emotional domain, this is often coupled with the assumption that emotions are harmful rather than productive. Mainstream works in populism studies recognize that emotions are important for populist politics, but also contend that the most common emotions are fear and anxiety, and that populist politicians play on the fears of ordinary people for political ends (Goodwin and Eatwell 2018; Mounk 2018; Müller 2016). This echoes the perspectives from the early crowd theorists, where individuals who partook in protest activities were bordering the insane and were therefore clearly seen as dangerous to democracy. These accounts are rather dismissive of the role of emotions in populist politics, identifying it as a threat to society.

RETHINKING EMOTIONS

Not all accounts of emotions in contemporary populism studies are equally negative, and it has become more commonplace to study the importance of emotions. Many of the current accounts of populism follow an earlier turn in sociology, which brings back the focus to emotions. After the initial hostility of political science and sociology to emotions in the nineteenth century, the latter half of the twentieth century saw two main developments in the role of emotions in politics. The first was a U-turn on how the crowd was conceptualized. Drawing on an understanding of popular politics as mad and threatening, the reigning perspective in political science in the post-war period was veering towards an almost complete denial of any involvement of emotions in political life. Political actors – be that individuals or groups – were now to be considered rational beings making decisions that would further their interests. Rational choice theory was very much in vogue and, while quite contested today, did bring a sense of legitimacy to social movements. Political protest was no longer considered an activity of the mentally unstable; social movements were now considered rational entities. While this was a positive development for many social movements, it also contributed to a rationalization of politics which was not without problems. Rationality, the pursuit of one's interests, was not produced in a political vacuum and most often afforded to political causes which did not significantly threaten the status quo. Some social movements were simply more rational than

others, which often coincided with how closely they were aligned with the political mainstream. As such, even though political scientists did argue that social movements should be seen as rational, both the Civil Rights movement and the Second Wave feminist movement of the 1960s were often labelled as hysteric and irrational – their causes were too threatening to the establishment to deserve the label ‘rational’. Even though social movements were not immediately dismissed as mad, the focus on rationality introduced other barriers to political participation.

Only after the 1968 moment was there a real change of pace regarding the role of emotions in politics, with a new emphasis on immaterial factors for political protest, going beyond class and economic determinism (Melucci 1985; Polleta and Jasper 2001). As described by Goodwin et al., this signified a reconceptualization of how movements and political protest was considered. The role of emotions now took on more of a centre stage, but not as a threat. Instead, emotions became a central topic in the study of political participation and popular power (Goodwin et al. 2000, 2005). Tilly and Tarrow’s seminal works on mobilization also helped further an understanding of political actors as motivated not only by rational interests but also by personal experiences and histories. All of these insights helped produce a fertile ground for a new type of scholarship which took emotions seriously. Many of these works are found in sociology; feminist scholarship, in particular, has been key to understanding how the personal is political (Hochschild 1979; Hoggett and Thompson 2002).

These insights from social theory have also gained traction in populism studies. In recent years, scholarship on the emotional nature of populist movements has multiplied and now includes numerous studies. It has become commonplace to measure the emotionality of populist movements and argue that populist movements are more emotional than other political actors (Skonieczny 2018; Wirz 2018). Other scholars aim to map which emotions are most prevalent in different populist parties (Breeze 2019; Martella and Bracciale 2022; Salmela and von Scheve 2017), reaffirming the belief that right-wing populists appeal more to fear and anger than left-wing populists. Similarly, Demertzis has studied in depth how trauma and *ressentiment* is closely related with political identities, and in particular the rise of populism (Demertzis 2022). Many studies also use large-N studies to map and measure the degree of emotionality in populist discourse (Valentim and Widmann 2021; Widmann 2021). Many of these studies recognize the co-constitutive nature of emotion and reason and argue that they must be studied in tandem (Bonansinga 2020).

The scholarship on the role of emotions in populism signifies a growing body of work. Nevertheless, there are other perspectives within the field which do not work exclusively on emotions, but whose insights are vital to understanding the emotionality of populist movements. For instance, the socio-cultural approach developed by Ostiguy is central to understanding how populism functions today (Ostiguy 2017). Ostiguy purports that populism cannot and indeed should not be studied as a nominal or an ordinal category, that is, focusing on whether something is populist or not, or to what degree something is populist. Instead, he argues that populism should be seen as a struggle between the ‘high’ and the ‘low’ of politics. This argument carries significant weight for the study of emotions in populism. Ostiguy’s critique of studying populism as a nominal or an ordinal category can equally be applied to the study of emotions in populism, where many studies have been concerned with whether populists are emotional or not, or to what extent they are emotional and which emotions they exhibit. If one adopts the socio-cultural approach, the study of emotions as an expression of the ‘high’ against the ‘low’ becomes central, instead of being a peripheral category. Ostiguy’s

work thus contributes to a deeper understanding of political action in general by focusing on how certain characteristics beyond simple ideologies (such as the expression of emotion) are central to the creation of political identities.

RETHINKING AFFECT

While the role of emotions in populism has become more commonplace in research, it is also important to engage with the question of affect. In order to do this, we must enquire into the so-called ‘affective turn’, which signifies a break in social and cultural studies against how emotions were typically understood. The reason for introducing a focus on affect instead of only on emotions lies in how emotions as a concept has not really broken free from the rationalist shackles imposed by both scholars and practitioners. This means that even though we have seen an upswing in the number of studies focusing on emotions and populism, and now, as a result, popular movements are not only thought of as pursuing their rational self-interest, there is a lingering trace of what I term the hegemony of rationality in the study of popular mobilization. For instance, it has become common to place hierarchies on which types of emotions protesters and political actors are exhibiting and to classify these as more or less ‘cognitive’. To this end, Jasper argues that ‘emotions involve beliefs and assumptions open to cognitive persuasion. We often can be talked out of our anger on the grounds that it is too extreme a response, or that we are misinformed’ (1998: 401).

Affect, on the other hand, is of a different nature, and has become increasingly important when studying populism. Several studies on populism use affect as an analytical tool (Stoehrel 2017), but it is vital to understand how this framework differs from other approaches to emotions within populism research. One of the main theorists in affect theory is Massumi, who has written extensively about how affect influences social and political action. For Massumi, affect is not a cognitive affair, it is but a ‘non-conscious, never-to-be-conscious remainder’ and is as ‘disconnected from meaningful sequencing, from narration, as it is from vital function’ (Massumi 1995: 85). Massumi thus breaks from a long tradition which conceives of emotions and affect as largely synonymous and argues that the two have to be separated. Importantly, says Massumi, we have to recognize the true political implications of the deconstructive turn (here he draws heavily on Deleuze and Guattari), and break free from the fear of engaging with the body or the material realm. He argues that within the context of the ‘linguistic turn’, which had become so popular in the social sciences, there was an unnecessary distance towards the affective realm. This can also be seen in populism studies, where there has been a very strong focus on rhetorical analysis, and less attention given to matters concerning the body. There is a growing field, however, which moves beyond the linguistic concentration in populism studies (Aiolfi 2022; Casullo 2020).

The affective turn thus reintroduces a focus on bodily experience, and not only on the spoken or written word. Affect, thought of as a sensation, should be seen as separate from cognition. Emotions, on the other hand, are taking this sensation into the cognitive realm, and associate meaning and concepts to the corporeal experience – we can express *why* we are angry, happy or sad. Massumi’s theories are widely popular, and have gained significant status in cultural studies, sociology and political studies alike. Many have embraced the possibility to engage with the material realm again, to focus on practice rather than rhetoric, and not to be limited to the cognitive. Such scholars include Thrift (2007), who has used affect theory to

conceptualize a non-representational theory of space. Similarly, Connolly has used Massumi's works to further a theory which incorporates neuroscience into social science, emphasizing the importance of the bodily experience for politics (Connolly 2013). Massumi's works have also been widely used to explain mobilization and political action, for instance in Gould's work on the LGBT movement (Gould 2009) or in works on the hierarchies of emotions in social movements (Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005). For scholars working within the affective turn, affect is thus something which is prior to an emotion, an energy which can be channelled towards different political causes. Gould's work is particularly instructive when understanding the difference between affect and emotion. Pride in the LGBT movement is an affect or a bodily sensation, but this becomes an emotion when affect is associated with political causes and brought into the 'realm of cultural meaning' (Gould 2009: 21), and this is what forms the basis for political identities, a shared experience.

While the affective turn has been widely acclaimed, it is not without problems. Important advances have been made over the past decades regarding the recognition of emotions and affect as deeply political, and scholarly works within the emotional and affective turns have significantly changed the terms of the debate. This is also true when it comes to populism, where the study of the emotional aspects of populism is now a widely recognized field. Nevertheless, some of the initial problems around the conceptualization of emotions and affect remain. Particularly, there is a tendency to reproduce the old dichotomies between emotion and reason, and a continued commitment to the Cartesian division between the cognitive self, the ego/cogito, and our bodily sensations. Not only is there a focus on the body, but there is a remaining conviction that the body is distinct from our cognitive domain.

This division has been interrogated by several scholars (Glynos 2012; Leys 2011). They take issue with the claim that discourse is considered as separate from the material, bodily realm. In short, they criticize the new materialist turn, which argues that the linguistic turn in the social sciences has placed too much emphasis on the cognitive (Connolly 2013). Paradoxically, as a result of the latter emphasis, we are seeing a renewed commitment to the division between the presumed immaterial (language, the cognitive realm) and the material (the body). Leys argues that Massumi and Connolly operate 'at once with a highly intellectualist or rationalist concept of meaning and an unexamined assumption that everything that is not "meaning" in this limited sense belongs to the body' (Leys, 2011: 458). Glynos follows in a similar vein when arguing that new materialism has a strong tendency to 'dichotomise matter and meaning' (Glynos 2012: 175). Zerilli is even more critical of new materialism and contends that there is no reason why affect should be seen as lacking meaning or be separate from discourse (Zerilli 2013). This has important consequences for the study of affect. If the affective turn was supposed to signify a redemption for emotions and affect, it is rather peculiar that the field wishes to retain the very differences between the body and the mind which led to the degradation of emotions within politics in the first place.

There are, nevertheless, perspectives which offer a solution to this conundrum. Lessons from psychoanalytic theory can provide a theoretical framework, which circumvents the Cartesian division while still remaining committed to the importance of affect for the study of politics, and in particular populism. Such works can be found in radical democratic theory which draws heavily on Lacanian psychoanalysis, as exemplified by Laclau. This has also become increasingly popular in populism studies, and many scholars draw on Laclau when analysing the populist moment (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; Katsambekis 2020). Laclau provides a theory of how to study populism – and its emotional and affective components –

without falling prey to common stereotypes and misconceptions. Laclau is unconvinced about the Cartesian division between mind and body, and his works build on the critique of the *ego cogito* by Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger. Instead, Laclau follows two main assumptions about the subject: first, he builds on Foucault to argue that political subjects are always historically situated, i.e. there are no stable subjects, only *subject positions* (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 115). Laclau follows Foucault's critique of the *Age of Man*, meaning that we cannot simply study the agency of individuals to understand social relations. Second, however, there is also a recognition over time that the Foucauldian idea of subject positions is not enough to understand the desire to sediment and fix what different subjects are and what they want. This leads to an engagement with Lacan, who offers a useful vocabulary to understand the role of emotions and affect in politics, and in particular populism.

The main insight from Lacan (1977) begins with how individuals are conceptualized. For Lacan, there is no possibility (as there is for Descartes) that any subject can be considered in its entirety. Lacan argues that there is an ultimate impossibility marking identification – any subject is unable to fully realize their identity, every individual suffers from a constitutive lack. This does not mean that there is not a desire to do so. Laclau, following Lacan, places this argument into a social setting, and argues that the impossibility of identification also means that there is a more general impossibility of signification (Laclau 2007) – terms and concepts do not have any essential meaning, and this is what makes space for the political, for the contestation of meaning. This is crucial for the study of affect – the terms and concepts we use are reliant upon what Laclau terms affective investment. We wish to find meaning and structure accordingly in our social reality (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 112), but any attempt at fixing meaning remains only that, an attempt. As such, affective investment in what Laclau terms an empty signifier (always only tendentially empty, and never really filled) is the very basis for the political. We cannot consider politics outside of these conditions, as they are what enable it. When studying populism, this perspective becomes absolutely vital, since all politics is highly affective; not only populist politics. Mouffe also developed this perspective when writing about the emancipatory potential of left populism, where she identifies affective investment as a central part of the political project (Mouffe 2018: 73–76).

This view of affect as the foundational structure that makes the political possible is very different from other theories. It is clearly distinguished from perspectives that see emotions as harmful or antithetical to politics. However, it is also distinct from much of affect theory and in particular from new materialism. The main difference lies in the conceptualization of discourse, where Laclau (following Lacan and Foucault) does not support that discourse is immaterial. Discourse encompasses everything: speech, practices, actions, emotions and affect. Discourse delimits the possible. As such, the study of discourse must inevitably include the study of emotions and affect, not as external to the discursive sphere, but as an inextricable part of it. As such, it becomes vital to recognize the suitability of Laclau for studying affective politics (Eklundh 2019) and going beyond the traditional use of his theory as primarily linguistic.

When studying populism, it is, however, very common to treat emotions as different from other forms of political expression and to make a more general assumption about the prevalence of emotions in politics. The most common examples of this are how often right-wing populists are considered, more or less, mad, but we can equally apply it to how Greta Thunberg has been labelled as populist, and how many have connected this with her autism, labelling populism as an enterprise of the mentally unstable (Fitzpatrick 2019). As mentioned above,

populists are often assumed to be more emotional, more affective and more transgressive. If we employ a Laclauian perspective, these divisions become obsolete. If all politics is ultimately built on affective investment, populism is simply another expression of this. In this framework, Trump or Thunberg are not more emotional or affective than any other politician. Rather, the act of labelling them as emotional populists becomes more than an analytical exercise, it is closer to a normative judgment. Recent scholarship has pointed to how populism, and in particular the emotional aspects of populism, is used to denote someone as an outsider (De Cleen et al. 2018; Dean and Maignushca 2020; Eklundh 2020; Glynos and Mondon 2019). The growing literature on anti-populism points in a similar direction (Stavrakakis 2014). It is thus important to situate much of current scholarship on populism within the long tradition of seeing emotional political actors as inherently pathological.

FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDAS

Finally, this chapter will give an overview of the emerging studies which are using the lessons described above and analyse populism from an affective perspective which is not laden with normative assumptions about how a ‘proper’ politician should or should not behave. These are new and exciting frontiers in the research of emotions within populism studies. This chapter identifies three important avenues of research. The first aspect is methodological. It is very common to study populism, and also emotions in populism, through discourse analytical tools which are highly focused on speech. Many studies of populism use speeches of political leaders, or political programmes and manifestos, as their main form of data (Breeze 2019; March 2007, 2017; Plaza-Colodro et al. 2018; Salmela and von Scheve 2017). While this is obviously a valid form of analysis, it also carries some implications for the type of research that is possible. If we are studying emotions in politics, can we measure them by simply identifying ‘emotional speech’? However, if we define affect and emotions as not simply a cognitive process, but also an embodied experience, how can we make sure that we have the appropriate methodological tools at our disposal to also measure this? This relates to Ostiguy’s criticism of the ‘measuring problem’ in populism studies, where too much of the discussion has been centred on whether populism is a nominal or ordinal category (Ostiguy 2017). The field must also engage with non-linguistic practices, with how populists act, perform and are represented through communication that is not limited to the written or spoken word, in order to fully grasp the emotional and affective aspects of populism. The (performative) insights from Laclau, that discourse is always both material and immaterial, should be more fully embraced in the methods used when studying populism. Performance, bodily expressions and material conditions more generally should thus form an integral part of the study of populism.

Luckily, there is a growing body of research which addresses this problem and forms part of the second promising avenue of future research. Populism is increasingly seen as a performance and must therefore be studied as such (Sorensen 2021). Casullo (2020) has also noted how populism is not only represented linguistically, how the body itself becomes a core site of representation for populist actors. In addition, embodied experience is key to the study of how populism breaks different norms. The emotional label is tightly interwoven with what is termed a ‘transgressive style’ (Aiolfi 2022). The aesthetic aspects of populism are increasingly noted. The excellent work of the Banana Populism collective (Banana Populism 2022) has put the practice of populist leaders and movements at the centre. In addition to studying the

speeches, we must also engage with the aesthetic practices. For instance, Marine Le Pen's cat obsession on social media represents an affective practice intended to humanize an arguably inhuman politician who advocates harsher living conditions for the most vulnerable in France. Similarly, the visual representations of how populists work are equally important as what they say, and form the very core of populist politics (Hartikainen 2021; Schmalenberger 2022).

The third avenue recognizes the works of feminist theory and its advances on the role of emotions in politics (Ahmed 2004; Labanyi 2010). The latter is, however, also central for understanding the mechanisms of emotions in populism. As always, emotions are gendered, and often tied with an assumed feminine behaviour – women are too emotional to participate in politics. There is an increasing body of research on the gendered aspects of populism, which also furthers the understanding of emotions and affect, which are themselves highly gendered. For instance, there is important work which recognizes the male anxieties underlying a populist vote (Keskinen 2018; Kinnvall 2015; Miller-Idriss 2017). Biglieri and Cadahia have also produced ground-breaking work which aims to recapture populism for a feminist cause, highlighting the emancipatory potential of populism for care and love (2021). We can focus on the feminization and masculinization of populism, which is not always straightforward (Caravantes 2019, 2020). Populism is at the same time considered too feminine for proper politics (emotional, hysteric) but is also hypermasculinized. Further research into this area is necessary to understand the performative aspects of gendered discourses on populism.

CONCLUSION

The role of emotions is vital when studying populism. However, the way that we study emotions also matters. While many would like to equate emotional populism with a problem for democratic politics, emotions are also productive forces which are essential to any political action. Importantly, our definition of emotions is highly political and has historically been used as a tool for exclusion. This is present still today in the rhetoric of anti-populism (Galanopoulos and Venizelos 2022; Moffitt 2018; Stavrakakis et al. 2018). However, we are seeing new and promising signs of a vital research culture on emotions in populism.

The field is very diverse and conceptualizes emotions very differently. Some would like to argue that we can easily measure emotions by looking at emotive terms in speech, whereas others are more concerned with the performative aspects of populism and emotions. This essentially emanates from a different theoretical background, where scholars influenced by affect theory have a higher propensity to study embodied practices of populism. Crucially, however, perspectives on populism which see discourse as both material and immaterial (such as Laclau's), are able to integrate an analysis of affect and emotion without falling prey to the common dichotomization between emotion and reason, or mind and body.

By circumventing these divisions, a more productive view on emotions and affect is possible. This also delimits the politicization of emotions in populism. If all political identities are built on affective and emotional investment, labelling some as emotional and others as rational becomes a purely normative exercise to denote the inside and the outside of normalized politics.

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27. Psychoanalytic political theorization

Thomás Zicman de Barros

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, psychoanalysis has emerged as an important tool to study populism. The scholar who contributed the most towards the psychoanalytic turn in populism studies was certainly Ernesto Laclau (1935–2014), inspiring a new generation of researchers to explore this fruitful interdisciplinary articulation. These authors have awakened academia to the fact that psychoanalysis is not limited to studying particular subjects. They have stressed that every subject emerges as such within a socio-political context. Subjectivity is always politically shaped. This understanding is not entirely new, though. For instance, around one third of Sigmund Freud's works were devoted to discussing social issues. Recent contributions have nonetheless moved beyond the reflections of the pioneers of psychoanalysis. They not only provide fruitful concepts for understanding the force of populist phenomena, but also allow the conceptualization of a radical democratic populism.

Drawing on this literature, this chapter attempts to summarize the main contributions of psychoanalysis to populism studies. This effort is divided into three moments. First, we map the lineage that connects contemporary populism studies with Freud's early comments on mass psychology. Yet, the current psychoanalytic turn in populism studies tries to break with the simplistic stigmatization of the masses as a threat for democracy that was still present in Freud's work and continues to occasionally influence mainstream accounts of populism. Second, we discuss four psychoanalytic categories that have been recently deployed to explain the force and salience of populist discourses: drive, desire, fantasy and enjoyment. Third, we highlight two psychoanalytic metaphors – symptom and sublimation – that have been utilized to account for populism. We shall argue that while the metaphor of populism as symptom resonates with undemocratic expressions of populism, the metaphor of populism as sublimation better captures radical democratic populist experiences.

FROM MASS PSYCHOLOGY TO POPULISM STUDIES

Traditionally, the irruption of the masses within politics has been regarded with suspicion. Part of this suspicion might be justified, as some mass phenomena can indeed threaten liberal democracy. However, historically, the hostility towards the masses has also figured in discourses that sought to dismiss legitimate demands of disenfranchised groups, associating them with a hateful mob. In this first section, we will briefly present Freud's mass psychology as paradigmatic of such a pessimistic view of mass formation. Then, we will discuss the efforts taken to counterweight this perspective, and how the current discussion on psychoanalysis and populism addresses this stigmatization.

Efforts to use psychoanalysis to study populism are inscribed within a long tradition. In fact, Freud's famous reflections on mass psychology from 1921 discuss the writings on crowd

formation by authors such as Gustave Le Bon and William McDougall that predate the very development of psychoanalysis as a field of enquiry. However, in this thread, Freud's contribution is seminal as it moved beyond the impasses of previous works. As Freud points out, preceding studies on crowds ended up relying on the underdeveloped notion of suggestibility – the idea that subjects have a tendency to imitate one another, in a contagious process, and that leaders with prestige would be particularly able to influence others. Suggestibility, Freud says, was a 'magical word' that did not explain the dynamics of the masses (Freud 1955 [1921]: 88).

Freud's contribution was key because, moving beyond the dead-ends of suggestibility, he stated that it was libido – i.e. love – that played the role of a glue fusing a mass together (Freud 1955 [1921]: 90). And it is in his mass psychology that he associated libido with a concept that would be key to psychoanalysis as a whole: the concept of identification. Identification can be understood as an internalization process, through which the subject introjects an external image of who he/she ideally must become, always assuming the perspective of the others' gaze. In what may sound like a psychoanalytic *cliché*, to explain the identification processes in masses, Freud starts by explaining the first experiences of identification in early childhood, in the libidinal connection between the baby and the baby's caring others. While Freud presents different and complex models of identification in adult life, one can say that in all cases it is related to love (Freud 1955 [1921]: 105–107). And this is not different in mass formations.

In a mass, Freud says, there are two axes at play during identification processes (Freud 1955 [1921]: 134–135). The first, the vertical axis, involves the fascination of the members of the mass by a leader – or by a guiding idea, although he does not develop this hypothesis. The second, the horizontal axis, establishes the identification between the members of the mass themselves, based on the shared love for this fascinating entity. In a nutshell, in a mass formation the members of the mass identify with each other because they are all fascinated by the same object – generally a charismatic leader. This leader presents himself in a paternal position of authority, embodying the ideals of the subject, but foremost is seen by the mass as loving its members, protecting them from helplessness.

Freud's theory of mass formation was ground-breaking and allowed one to consider the mass dynamics at play in well-established institutions, beyond short-lived crowds – indeed the Church and the Army figure as Freud's main examples. Nonetheless, it still reproduced a pessimistic tone. Like Le Bon and McDougall before him, Freud still saw the masses as sacrificing critical thinking. Masses blind the subject 'to the pitch of crime', he said (Freud 1955 [1921]: 113).

Freud himself has pointed out that the uncritical fascination by a leader does not come alone. He envisaged human relations as ontologically conflictual. Of course, conflict is not something necessarily negative. A frank disagreement between different opinions, after all, stands at the base of liberal democracy. As a pessimist, however, Freud thought that the conflict that accompanied mass formation involved a somewhat fanatical mobilization to eliminate antagonistic scapegoats and deny politics as such (Freud 1961 [1929]: 110–114).

The problem with Freud's pessimism is that it ended up dismissing from the outset the possibility of a *democratic* mass. To counter his account, therefore, some authors sought to think of an emancipatory mass. As Vladimir Safatle indicates, this was notably the case of Freud's contemporary Paul Federn. Inspired by the revolutions of his time, Federn claimed that socialist experiences would allow for the emergence of leaderless masses, of a fatherless society based on non-hierarchical egalitarian fraternal bonds (Federn 2002 [1919]: 233–234). Whereas original, Federn's conjectures were harshly criticized and, furthermore, contrasted

with the authoritarian tendencies that unfolded from the revolutions he saw as promising (Safatle 2015: 114).

After Federn, others challenged Freud to consider collective emancipation. This was the case with the Freud-Marxist tradition, in which one finds authors such as Wilhelm Reich (1945 [1936]) and Herbert Marcuse (1966 [1955]). Despite their different trajectories, Freud-Marxists generally thought that the masses' tendency towards vertical paternal organization – verified even in socialist experiences – could be addressed by some form of sexual revolution (Reich 1945 [1936]: 260–269). Whereas undoubtedly influential, their defence of a libidinal liberation has been nonetheless described as naïve and idealized, to say the least, notably from a perspective informed by Jacques Lacan (Stavrakakis 2007: 28).

Yet, a different solution could emerge to move beyond Freud's pessimism if one considered that relations where the vertical dimension still plays an important role can, nevertheless, be emancipatory (Safatle 2015: 113–114). Together with Slavoj Žižek, Laclau is a central figure of the so-called psychoanalytic turn in political theory starting in the late 1980s, precisely inspired by the works of Lacan. Here, the debate around mass formation reappears through discussions around populism.

Although the term populism did not always carry a pejorative meaning, mainstream scholarly production around the concept has reproduced the aforementioned tendency of vilifying the masses (Stavrakakis and Jäger 2018: 558). Populism, in this sense, has also been associated with resentful, dangerous mobs. Even the Marxist left has contributed to this repudiation, claiming to know the objective interests of the working class and presenting populism as deceptive manipulation (Zicman de Barros and Lago 2022: 62–64, 138–139). Laclau's theory of populism tried to break with these hegemonic understandings (Laclau 2005: 19).

For Laclau, populism is neither good nor bad. Populism, he says, is a political logic through which a collective subject emerges. There is populism when a number of particular subjects are assembled under a common symbol, such as the signifier 'the people', against an antagonistic other (Laclau 2005: 130). Whereas populism can acquire undemocratic expressions, Laclau ceaselessly stressed that this was not necessarily the case. The conflict populism entails can precisely strengthen liberal democracy from a radical perspective. In some configurations, conflict denaturalizes hierarchies, shows that society could be organized on radically different grounds and, in this process, facilitates the incorporation of subaltern groups.

However, a thorough understanding of Laclau's argument requires studying the psychoanalytic concepts on which he increasingly relied, starting with minor references to psychoanalysis in 1985 and ending up with in-depth discussions of Freud and Lacan from the turn of the century onwards. Although his incorporation of psychoanalysis is not uncontroversial and remains open to various interpretations, it stands at the basis of his claim that such a thing as a radical democratic populism could exist.

THE LIBIDINAL FORCE OF POPULISM

Before explaining how Laclau's contributions, drawing on psychoanalysis, allow one to think of a radical democratic populism, it is worth indicating how the recent psychoanalytic turn has contributed more broadly to a more comprehensive understanding of the strength of populist discourses, radical democratic or not. In this effort, the works of Laclau and Žižek are seminal, as well as the reflections by Jason Glynos and Yannis Stavrakakis, which further developed

these orientations. Certain advances in this field have led to the emergence of ‘critical fantasy studies’, a promising field of research from which populism scholars have benefited (Glynos 2021).

All these authors have pointed out that a discourse – be it populist or not – does not hold simply because of the rhetorical force of its arguments (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2004: 209–213). To some extent, an internal cohesion of ideas must be the least important thing to explain why, for instance, a reference to the ‘people’ can be so appealing. Drawing on Freud’s argument presenting libido as the glue that fuses masses together, these authors have argued that what sustains a discourse is the libidinal, affective investment it invites and may receive. And to further account for this affective investment, they have relied on Lacanian categories such as drive, desire, fantasy and enjoyment. I will now briefly present these concepts and then explain how they have been applied in populism studies.

To explain the notions of drive, desire, fantasy and enjoyment, it is necessary, once again, to reproduce a psychoanalytic *cliché* and claim that everything starts in early childhood. As Lacan would put this, all humans are born prematurely (Lacan 1966 [1960]: 810). Newborns depend on someone who takes care of them. Moreover, a newborn is always confused, to say the least. The baby does not understand itself as a fully separated subject. The newborn does not know where its mouth ends and where the mother’s breast begins. They form a whole that the newborn experiences – or, to be precise, will retrospectively idealize as if it had experienced – as some kind of pre-symbolic full enjoyment. This experience was described by some of Freud’s interlocutors as an ‘oceanic feeling’, which he referred to as ‘an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole’ (Freud 1961 [1929]: 65).

It is from these early experiences that one can understand the notions of drive and desire. The notion of drive is one of the most complex in psychoanalysis, located at the limits between the somatic and the symbolic. In the symbiotic relation with the mother, the mother eroticizes zones of the baby’s body, at the same time as the baby gets attached not to the mother as a whole but to traits of the mother. Drives, therefore, are always partial – they name the effort not to seek an object in its entirety, but to seek only a trait of the object – a mnemonic trait that refers to early childhood – and find a bodily satisfaction not from grasping the object, but rather from repeatedly encircling it. As Lacan explains, it’s not from the food that the mouth gets its satisfaction, but from the mouth itself – ‘*le plaisir de la bouche*’ – as an erogenous zone (Lacan 2014 [1964], 188–189).

The notion of desire is related but ultimately distinguished from the drive. In brief, the drive is at the basis of desire. According to Lacan, desire appears when the symbiosis between the newborn and the mother is broken, in a process that he calls symbolic castration (Lacan 1991 [1970]: 83). When the mother is not at hand, the baby must communicate with her through language, through symbols. These symbols will lead the baby to realize that it is a separated entity. Lacan calls this process symbolic castration because the pre-symbolic full enjoyment will never be recovered. The subject is thus marked by what Laclau has named a ‘dislocation’ (Laclau 1990: 29–33), which Emmy Eklundh would more recently call a ‘crisis of subjectivity’ (Eklundh 2019: 132). The subject is marked, in other words, by a constitutive lack. It is irreconcilably split between an external image of itself and its inner being, in two parts that will never form a full identity. This produces a *malaise*, helplessness or, as Lacan would put it, anguish. In this process, desire and fantasy emerge.

The dynamics of fantasy are key to understanding the difference between drive and desire. Since Freud’s early writings, the notion of fantasy is the other side of the coin of desire. He

even uses the expression ‘fantasy of desire’ or ‘desiring fantasy’ at various times in his work (Freud 1953 [1900]: 264). Desire is precisely the product of a lack. One fantasizes because there is something lacking. Fantasy is the means to provide an answer to desire, to seek to overcome this lack. However, while in the drive one seeks a partial trait of the object, in desire one ends up seeking a phantasmatic object in its entirety. Fantasy will present an object that promises to re-establish the idealized pre-symbolic full enjoyment. The problem, for Lacan, is that no object can play this role (Lacan 2014 [1964]: 303). Even when the subject acquires the desired object, after an initial euphoria from a partial body enjoyment from the drive, the only thing to be ultimately experienced is frustration (Lacan 2016 [1973]: 142). Every idealized object will be inadequate to provide full enjoyment, to overcome the subjective split and provide the subject with a full identity with itself. The pre-symbolic full enjoyment cannot be recaptured.

As a result, fantasy does not provide a proper answer to lack, but rather misleads the subject. One could say that, in this process of seeking an idealized object, the subject gets lured by fantasy. The subject is lured by the phantasmatic promise that having this object would re-establish a moment of pre-symbolic full enjoyment. In this context, the goal of psychoanalysis is for the analysand to accept that the subject is indeed split, marked by a constitutive lack. What is achieved by the end of analysis, in fact, is a different way of dealing with this lack, with the fantasies it produces, and an alternative way of enjoying. At the end of an analysis, the subject may discover a way to value experiences of bodily enjoyment from the drive in their irreducible partiality, being able to enjoy the lack (Stavrakakis 2007: 279).

With the notions of drive, desire, fantasy and enjoyment in mind, one can analyse any discourse – and, notably, the variable spectrum of populist discourses – to determine the dynamics explaining its strength. Every society deals with drives, desire, fantasy and enjoyment in a particular way. In the case of undemocratic populist discourses, however, three aspects of affective dynamics deserve special attention: the fantasy of a reconciled society; the notion of ‘enjoyment-in-transgression’; and the idea of ‘theft of enjoyment’.

The claim that populism invokes fantasies of a reconciled society draws on the understanding that the collective realm is not only central in symbolic castration, but that it can take part in the fantasies of overcoming this castration. For instance, when a populist candidate claims that his/her victory would make the country great again, or lead a march towards a promised glory, he/she might be appealing to fantasies of full enjoyment, to the fantasy that through a reconciliation of a society freed from division, constituting a gated community freed from anguish, the subject would also arrive at a state of fullness, of identity with itself (Stavrakakis 2007: 196–197). Of course, these fantasies can never be fully realized. Their promises may be momentarily sustained by experiences of partial bodily enjoyment from the drive – such as blissful political rallies – but these *amuse-bouches* will never deliver a pre-symbolic full enjoyment.

The notion of ‘enjoyment-in-transgression’ is developed in dialogue with the fruitful tradition – often labelled stylistic, performative or socio-cultural – that focuses on the performances of populist politicians. In this tradition, Pierre Ostiguy has associated populists with a performative ‘flaunting of the low’, which Benjamin Moffitt would call ‘bad manners’ and Théo Aiolfi has more broadly named ‘transgressive style’ (Aiolfi 2022: 6–8; Moffitt 2016: 44; Ostiguy 2017: 73). As Safatle observes, whereas populist leaders would present themselves as figures of authority, they would also assume a carnivalesque attitude that presents them as simply another one in the crowd (Safatle 2015: 107). These performances resonate with Georges

Bataille, who had already affirmed that organized transgression and prohibition form a pair in social life (Bataille 1987 [1957]: 68). Modes of domination can be based on fantasies that reaffirm ideals of authority and obedience, but not only on that. To be bearable, a discourse that defends rigid obedience to the law must accommodate moments for its own transgression – periodic carnivalesque transgressions are the pressure release valve that contributes to reaffirming the ruling order. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Žižek, Glynos and Stavrakakis have argued that there is enjoyment in transgressing the law and that, when this transgression is organized, the enjoyment it produces can paradoxically participate in sustaining a structure of domination (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008: 268; Žižek 1994: 55).

The idea of the ‘theft of enjoyment’ resonates with another important dimension of populism: its reliance on antagonism. It has already been indicated that, for Freud, society is irreparably traversed by fanatical conflict. For him, whereas men aim to construct gated communities, they also attribute their subjective crisis to ‘a strange and threatening “outside”’ (Freud 1961 [1929]: 67). Complementing Freud, Lacan suggests that the hostility among humans is sustained by one’s constant tendency to judge one’s own enjoyment in comparison to that of others, and the propensity of idealizing the other’s enjoyment as constantly better (Lacan 2001 [1974]: 534). It was following these reflections that Jacques-Alain Miller and Žižek would then define the fantasy of the ‘theft of enjoyment’ (Miller 2010 [1986]: 55; Žižek 1993: 202–204), which refers to phantasmatic discourses that present an antagonist – e.g. the corrupt elite, or the immigrant – as ‘thieves of enjoyment’, as another who is enjoying at one’s expense and that must be eliminated for full enjoyment to be recaptured. This idea is important when studying populism to the extent that moralizing tropes are a common feature associated with populist discourses, presenting the other’s enjoyment as obscene, undeserved and immoral (Stavrakakis and Jäger 2018: 559).

Whereas psychoanalysis could thus contribute to our understanding of the strength of populist discourses, a further question remains open. If undemocratic populism invokes these fantasies of full enjoyment and scapegoating otherness, which dynamics take place in radical democratic populism? How can the conflict it entails rather strengthen liberal democracy?

POPULISM: SYMPTOM OR SUBLIMATION?

To understand the distinct affective dynamics of radical democratic populism, one can think of other moments in which psychoanalysis has appeared within populism studies. I am referring to two psychoanalytic metaphors that have been often used to study the phenomenon. In recent years, scholars have referred to the notions of ‘symptom’ and ‘sublimation’ to explain the dynamics of populism (Zicman de Barros 2022: 218). In what follows, I argue that, while the metaphor of populism as a symptom is related to undemocratic tendencies in populist outbursts, the metaphor of populism as sublimation allows one to consider something very different: a radical democratic populism.

Before doing this, I must stress that Freud presented symptom and sublimation as two different destinies of the drive. For Freud, the symptom is the by-product of the drive when it undergoes repression. Freud claims that the drive is the source of ideas and affects (Freud 1957 [1915]: 152–153). When the drive cannot find satisfaction – for instance, because satisfying the drive would be in conflict with the moral ideals of a subject – trauma occurs and the unbearable idea associated with it is repressed, thrown out of consciousness and into the

unconscious mind. The symptom emerges from repression because, as Freud suggests, simply taking an idea out of consciousness does not impede it from impacting the subject's life. It happens because the 'quota of affect' invested in an idea can neither be repressed nor dissolved or evaporate. It remains present and, left alone, produces anguish. To escape anguish, the detached 'quota of affect' ends up resurfacing at the conscious level connected to a substitutive representation (Freud 1957 [1915]: 149, 154).

This idea of symptom had several implications for political theory. Implicitly or explicitly, various authors have associated populism with a symptom. Chantal Mouffe was one of the first to evoke this concept. She wrote a book called *The Return of the Political* (1993), whose title resonates with Freud's idea of a return of the repressed.

In Mouffe's framework, populism is the symptom of a post-democratic society. The idea of post-democracy stands for a context in which liberal democratic institutions exist and operate, but where there are no real disputes among different political projects. In post-democracy, the idea that society could be radically different is repressed (Mouffe 2018: 13). Mouffe has claimed that centre-left and centre-right mainstream parties have become hardly distinguishable. Such political groups had accepted and naturalized a liberal consensus stating that policies should be set by experts seeking efficiency and mostly implementing austerity measures. In this process, something that is key for democracy – the frank conflict between ideas – cannot take place (Mouffe 2018: 4).

For Mouffe, whereas one can repress debate, the associated affects that cannot find an outlet will end up finding a way to reappear in the public sphere. The anguish and helplessness caused by austerity policies end up re-emerging as a symptom in populist outbursts (Mouffe 2018: 18). This, she believes, could redeem politics from post-democracy, re-establishing a space for political exchange and conflicting opinions in the public sphere.

In more explicit terms, the association between populism and symptom has been presented by Benjamin Arditi. He returned to Freud's claim that a symptom emerges in an 'internal foreign territory' of the subject (Freud 1964 [1933]: 57). For Freud, the symptom takes place within the subject, but is experienced as something external. Inspired by this idea, Arditi argues that populism stands at the 'internal periphery' of democracy, 'a phenomenon that develops in its edges or more turbulent regions' (Arditi 2007: 75). Also informed by Žižek, for whom the symptom indicates the failures of a given hegemonic discourse, Arditi claims that populism as symptom points to the blind spots of liberal democracy and nudges it to deliver its unfulfilled promises (Arditi 2007: 92). He famously compared populism with an awkward guest at a dinner party, a transgressive figure who creates uncanniness while saying some undeniable truths (Arditi 2007: 78).

Arditi's formulation inspired several scholars. For instance, Paula Biglieri and Gloria Perelló developed the idea of populism as a symptom to capture the way it can reinvigorate liberal democracy by indicating that things could be radically otherwise (Biglieri and Perelló 2006: 200–202). That said, although Mouffe, Arditi, Biglieri and Perelló tend to present populism-as-symptom as an emancipatory phenomenon, it is important to point out the limitations of this metaphor. Indeed, for Freud, symptom and fantasy form a pair, and whereas a symptomatic patient should not be stigmatized, the symptom is still pathological, and the ultimate goal of treatment is for it to dissolve.

In a nutshell, the problem with the metaphorical description of populism as symptom is that, from this perspective, populism is an inadequate response. It may indicate that there is something truly wrong in society, but the answer it offers is incorrect, misguided. The kind of

conflict populism as a symptom brings back may not be the frank debate of ideas, but rather the threatening conflict that Freud once worried about. In the end, instead of redeeming liberal democracy, populism's tendency to rely on fantasies of sovereignty, of gated communities that scapegoat the others as immoral thieves of enjoyment, would threaten liberal democratic life even further. One is not far from Antonio Gramsci's idea of 'morbid symptoms' emerging when an old society has already died, but the new cannot yet come to light (Gramsci 1971 [1930]: 276, Q3, §34). In a similar thread of thought, Žižek observes that populism would be '(sometimes) good in practice', but 'not good enough in theory' (Žižek 2008: 264). He meant that, while populism would be able to mobilize people, appearing as a tempting strategy to well-intended militants, its phantasmatic character is not likely to bring about emancipation.

Yet, whereas the metaphor of populism as symptom presents limits, Laclau's idea of populism as sublimation is more promising for radical democracy. In his book *On Populist Reason* (2005), Laclau openly associates the dynamics of radical democratic populism with the dynamics of sublimation (Laclau 2005: 113). To develop this argument, Laclau strongly draws on the psychoanalytic reflections of Joan Copjec, with whom he hosted joint seminars between 2000 and 2004 in the United States. Another key source of inspiration was Stavrakakis, who had previously wrote on democracy and sublimation (Stavrakakis 1999: 132). Furthermore, Laclau's position takes into account the work of Claude Lefort, who was in direct dialogue with Lacan's reflections on sublimation to develop his own ideas of democracy.

Although Freud remarked that sublimation was a possible destiny for the drive, different from the formation of a symptom, he never provided a systematic definition for this concept. This incompleteness may explain the – not uncommon – imprecise uses of the term in literature, notably in the attempts to articulate sublimation with the realm of politics and with populism. As Freud first flirted with the idea of associating sublimation with an 'ascetization' of the drive, some could claim that the frontier separating sublimation from moralistic repression may not be very clear. That said, with time, Freud abandoned this understanding, and his later account is that sublimation has nothing to do with ascetism or domestication (Birman 2005: 208).

It is true that, for psychoanalysis, sublimation is a means for the subject to realize that the fantasies of full enjoyment cannot hold. But it does not mean resignation. Quite the contrary. In sublimation, the subject discovers how to deal with its *malaise*, how to manage anguish without fully overcoming it. As in the end of analysis, the subject welcomes the experiences of partial bodily enjoyment from the drive and enjoys the lack as such in a rather enthusiastic way (Birman 2005: 208).

Since Freud, sublimation has been connected to aesthetic practices, such as art. But not any kind of art. As Lacan would make it clear, sublimation involves aesthetic practices that disturb, that short-circuit the symbolic order. The artwork Lacan refers to in his comments on sublimation – for example, a work of art composed of empty matchboxes – always point to their incompleteness (Lacan 2019 [1960]: 269). According to Lacan, such an artwork evokes the subject's condition, marked by division and incompleteness (Lacan 2019 [1960]: 190–191). This resonates with Freud's claim that the subject who sublimates often leaves his sublimating work incomplete, unfinished, or at least claims it has such a status.

Sublimation plays an important role in society. As indicated above, the references to emptiness in sublimation influenced Lefort's idea that in democracy the place of power is an empty place – i.e. that in democracy conflict takes place in such a way that no one can claim to embody the source of power, law and knowledge (Lefort 1986 [1983]: 27–29).

Despite the explicit differentiation he introduces vis-à-vis Lefort's formulations on the empty place of power in democracy, a similar use of the notion of sublimation appears in one of the most famous concepts of Laclau's theory of populism: the concept of the empty signifier (Laclau 2005: 166). Although the empty signifier is a polysemic concept, the same idea of a symbolization of emptiness in democracy is present in its constitution. One is dealing with the 'symbolization of an impossibility *as such*' (Laclau 2000: 199).

Following Laclau's idea of populism as sublimation, one can think of an appeal to the 'people' that neither hides from anguish nor invokes fantasies of sovereignty, of gated communities, of full enjoyment. At least, one attempts to organize these fantasies differently. Not far from Lacan's ideas on sublimation, the appeal to the 'people' would instead refer to an entity with porous borders. The 'people' of this kind of populism questions its own identity. Hence, this 'people' is open to that which Laclau has named heterogeneity (Laclau 2005: 141). This is a concept inspired by Bataille but also formulated in dialogue with Gramsci's idea of subalternity. Biglieri and Perelló have associated Laclau's understanding of heterogeneity with Lacan's concept of the real – a notion that he used to refer to the blind spots of the symbolic order (Biglieri and Perelló 2011: 56). In practical terms, in populism as sublimation the appeal to the 'people' constantly welcomes and incorporates the invisible, the heterogeneous, that which Jacques Rancière calls the 'part of no part' (Rancière 1995: 28). A sublimatory populism does not speak in the name of the 'people' to discriminate against the subalterns nor to threaten liberal democracy. On the contrary, it deepens and radicalizes liberal democracy. It appeals to the 'people' to constantly point out the blind spots of liberal democracy, claiming a place for the subaltern in it.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown how the psychoanalytic turn in populism studies has contributed to further capturing the affective dynamics that structure populist mobilizations and outbursts. This turn has enriched Freud's breakthrough idea that libido is the main element that keeps a mass together. Indeed, because of his pessimism, Freud understood that the love keeping a mass together would obliterate any critical thinking, thus disallowing the formation of radical democratic collective movements.

Starting with Laclau, various scholars have used the Lacanian categories of drive, desire, fantasy and enjoyment to consider not only the undemocratic expressions on populism, but also its emancipatory promise. In this effort, some have argued that the psychoanalytic metaphor that understands populism as a symptom that reinstalls disagreement and conflict within a post-democratic context would contribute to an understanding of populism as a radical democratic option.

Presenting the limitations of this approach, the chapter has nonetheless claimed that an alternative metaphor deployed by Laclau himself could account for a radical democratic populism. Laclau's idea of populism as sublimation provides a framework to think of an appeal to the 'people' that is radically inclusionary, and that constantly questions the very identity of this 'people' avoiding homogeneous totalizations.

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28. Populism through surveys: personality, attitudes and behaviour

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INTRODUCTION

Populists often understand politics as a Manichean struggle between the will of the common people and an evil, conspiring elite. These ideas are expressed in the rhetoric and behaviour of populist leaders and supporters and have an impact on elected officials' behaviour and the resultant policies. Furthermore, these ideas are one of the main factors that motivate people to mobilize and support populists (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2019; Hawkins et al. 2020).

Populism has most often been examined from the supply side of politics, as scholarship primarily focused on the ideology and rhetoric of populist movements, parties and leaders. Most empirical research before the 2010s was based on qualitative approaches (e.g. Betz 1994; Mudde 2007; Taggart 2000). Since then, an increasing number of studies have followed a more quantitative approach, as they delve into the study of both the supply and demand sides of populism by using survey items. In the following sections of this chapter, we present how populism can be measured with surveys and the new concepts, insights and research paths that emerge by adopting this more quantitative approach in studying populism.

USING SURVEY ITEMS TO MEASURE POPULISM

Based on an ideational approach, i.e. that populism is a set of ideas, populism can be measured as an attitude that individuals can possess to a greater or a lesser extent. This approach paves the way for examining populism, both at the demand and supply sides, using quantitative methods. In this section, we present an overview of how surveys are used to gauge populist attitudes amongst individuals and what some of the relevant research findings are in this regard.

Recent scholarship uses survey items to measure levels of populism amongst individuals. Hawkins and Riding (2010) were among the first to develop a series of Likert scale survey items to measure populist attitudes in the United States. These items were included in the 2008 AmericasBarometer, which was fielded in 24 American countries. Four of these items, further refined by focusing on capturing the Manichean view of politics and the will of the people, were also included in the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Elections Studies and the 2008 Utah Colleges Exit Poll surveys (Hawkins et al. 2012). Drawing on these initial studies, many scholars have tested similar batteries of survey items. Most notable are the items tested by Akkerman et al. (2014) in the Netherlands (see Table 28.1, Pop1–Pop6), which have become an important point of reference for subsequent attempts to measure populism, particularly

because recent measurement studies highlight that these survey items cover a relatively broad range of information of the latent populist attitudes (Van Hauwaert et al. 2019, 2020).

Table 28.1 Populist attitudes survey items

Pop1	The politicians in Congress/Parliament need to follow the will of the people.
Pop2	The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.
Pop3	The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people.
Pop4	I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician.
Pop5	Elected officials talk too much and take too little action.
Pop6	What people call 'compromise' in politics is really just selling out on one's principles.
Pop7	The ordinary people are divided by many different values.
Pop8	The people who belong to the political elite are divided by many different values.
Pop9	Ordinary people are prevented from improving their lives by the actions of unaccountable elites.
Pop10	Not all politicians are the same; some genuinely care about what the people want.
Pop11	Democracy is about finding compromise between different interests and opinions.
Pop12	Ordinary people are unable to make the correct decisions about the future of our country.
Pop13	The majority of politicians are honest people.
Pop14	Modern politics is in essence a struggle between the good, honest people and the evil elite.
Pop15	The particular interests of the political class negatively affect the welfare of the people.
Pop16	Politicians always end up agreeing when it comes to protecting their privileges.
Pop17	Popular demands are today ignored in favour of what benefits the establishment.
Pop18	Political forces representing the people should adopt a more confrontational attitude in order to make their voice heard and influence decision making.

Source: Akkerman et al. (2014); Andreadis and Stavrakakis (2017); Hawkins et al. (2012); Stanley (2011); Stavrakakis et al. (2017); Van Hauwaert and van Kessel (2018).

Stanley (2011) also designed a set of eight Likert scale items to measure populist attitudes and populist support in Slovakia (see Table 28.1, Pop7–14). These included two items about the homogeneity of the people and the elite, two items about the antagonistic nature of political life, two items about attitudes towards democracy and two items about the moral dimension of politics. Five of these items were unique and the three referring to good versus evil, democracy and people's trust were similar to the items developed by others. Similarly, Van Hauwaert and van Kessel (2018) used eight Likert scale items to measure populism in nine European countries (see Table 28.1, Pop1–6 and Pop15–16).

The individual-level studies on populist attitudes mentioned above form the foundation of elite surveys on populist attitudes as well. Even though some of the more foundational studies of populism focus on elites in a more conceptual and qualitative way (e.g. Canovan 1999; Mudde 2004), recent scholarship takes a more quantitative approach to examine levels of populism amongst elites. Indeed, using survey items to measure populist attitudes at the elite level is very useful for the evaluation of elected officials' and political candidates' positions, thus gaining insight into the within-party differentiation of populism. In this regard, recent studies measure populist attitudes through elite surveys and tend to use the same (or at least similar) items as those mentioned above, adding two new survey items (see Table 28.1, Pop17–18) (Andreadis and Ruth-Lovell 2019; Andreadis and Stavrakakis 2017; Stavrakakis et al. 2017).

The implementation of populist items in surveys has opened novel pathways for populism research. For instance, scholars are now able to conduct comparative experimental studies connecting the development of a potential threat to different populist cues in various experi-

mental conditions (Hameleers et al. 2019). These settings enable scholars to study the effects of populist communication on populist attitudes and voting intentions (Hameleers et al. 2021) as well as on the mobilization of voters (Bos et al. 2020). In addition, the inclusion of populist items in surveys alongside other items gauging personality traits, attitudes and voting behaviour enables scholars to study their relationships, as outlined in the following sections.

PERSONALITY TRAITS OF POPULISTS

Some scholars have argued that personality affects support for populism either directly (e.g. Aichholzer and Zandonella 2016; Bakker et al. 2016; Van Assche et al. 2018) or indirectly by linking personality traits to populist attitudes (e.g. Caprara and Zimbardo 2004; Fatke 2019), which in turn are associated with populist voting intentions (e.g. Akkerman et al. 2014; Van Hauwaert and van Kessel 2018). However, Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser (2019: 7) claim that populist attitudes cannot relate to personality traits. In fact, they argue it is populist ideas, not personality traits, that activate populist attitudes by providing the context and the framing to individual citizens. Moreover, populist ideas cannot be transformed into a single personality trait as they are more ‘consciously articulated and politically specific’. Given Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser’s reasoning, populist ideas and personality traits seem to compete over which of the two mobilize populist attitudes.

From our perspective, the argument that populist ideas form the basis for mobilizing populist attitudes does not necessarily preclude the correlation between personality traits and populist ideas. It can be suggested that both populist ideas and personality traits contribute to the shaping and mobilization of populist attitudes. Moreover, it is possible that populist ideas may stem not only from external factors such as education, social/political occurrences, and crises, but also from specific personality traits which themselves could be shaped by these same external influences. The same can be applied to personality traits, which could potentially be influenced by both external factors and the individual’s own ideas; their relationship is dialectical. This aligns with the argument made by Boston et al. (2018) that, while personality largely remains consistent over time, it is possible for it to transform in response to certain socio-political events and evolutions.

At this point, it is worth defining the concept of personality. Psychology has traditionally conceived of personality as ‘a set of stable predispositions or personality traits’ (Sosnowska et al. 2020: 988) that affects many areas of psychological functioning (Corr and Matthews 2009). Cognitive and social psychological theories argue that there is an interaction between personality (including personality characteristics and traits), social relationships and other interrelated issues (Jensen-Campbell et al. 2009), implying that personality is not necessarily stable because it is influenced by the external context. Scholars studying the influence of personality on populist voting argue that a populist personality – if there is such a personality – predisposes voters towards supporting such parties. Such a personality is composed of a combination of deeply held personality traits and characteristic adaptations (i.e. populist attitudes) that together affect political behaviour (Kenny and Bizumic 2020). With that in mind, it is worth providing a concise overview of how personality traits and populist attitudes might relate amongst both elites and individuals.

In line with an extensive literature that connects individual personality with political attitudes and behaviour (Gerber et al. 2010, 2011), scholars studying populism have borrowed

certain structural taxonomies of personality, such as the ‘Big Five’ model² (McCrae and John 1992) from the field of personality psychology. These typologies are utilized either to predict populist vote or provide an explanatory account of the psychological underpinnings of people with populist attitudes, explaining their behaviour (e.g. Kenny and Bizumic 2020). Bakker et al. (2016) claim that voting for a populist party or a populist candidate has psychological roots.

Kenny and Bizumic (2020) suggest that individuals demonstrating clear populist predispositions tend to be open to new experiences and ideas, although according to Landwehr and Steiner (2017: 795) – who have in mind only right-wing populism – and Ackermann et al. (2018), this trait should be negatively associated with populist attitudes. Similarly, Bakker et al. (2016) argue that individuals open to novel ideas and experiences are more inclined towards adopting populist ideas, particularly when closely associated with a party disseminating populist messages. Vasilopoulos and Jost’s (2020) findings further corroborate this, illustrating that openness to new experiences and conscientiousness are associated with support for populist attitudes.

Moving along, Federico and Aguilera (2019) suggest that conscientiousness is related to criticism of those who potentially threaten the unity of the people in general. Interesting contradictions emerge when Fatke (2019) demonstrates a correlation between agreeableness and neuroticism with populist attitudes, a claim which is subsequently refuted by Bakker et al. (2016) and Ackermann et al. (2018) who argue against a link between agreeableness and populist attitudes. The latter studies suggest that lower scores of agreeableness, characterized by distrust towards others, typically correlate with endorsement for populist parties due to their susceptibility to anti-establishment messages. In addition, Vasilopoulos and Jost (2020) find that neuroticism has a negative relationship with populist support, contradicting Fatke’s (2019) finding stated above. Other scholars point to political cynicism as a significant factor in the support for right-wing populist parties (Van Assche et al. 2018). On another point, while extroversion is found to associate positively with populist attitudes by Ackermann et al. (2018), other studies (e.g. Fatke 2019; Kenny and Bizumic 2020; Vasilopoulos and Jost 2020) dispute this relationship. Overall, it seems that individual-level studies remain quite scattered in their findings.

While a significant number of researchers have delved into the analysis of elite personality traits in both Europe and the United States (notably Dietrich et al. 2012; Nørgaard and Klemmensen 2018; Visser et al. 2017), insight into the personality traits of populist elites remains extremely limited. To the best of our knowledge, no research targeting the personality traits of populist elites extends beyond the realm of populist candidates. The recent literature exploring candidates’ personality traits suggests that populist candidates tend to lack agreeableness, emotional stability, and conscientiousness, but display traits such as narcissism, Machiavellianism, and extroversion (Nai and Martinez i Coma 2019). In fact, populist candidates are noted for their usage of strong wording and offensive discourse, often infused with ‘invectives, ironies, sarcasm, and even personal attacks’ (Corbu et al. 2017: 328). These candidates seemingly possess social charm, energy, and charisma, yet tend to fall short in cooperative, pro-social behaviours, tolerance, discipline, responsibility, and calmness. In particular, right-wing populist candidates are often associated with poor impulse control, self-centrism, risk-taking, and lack of guilt (Lilienfeld et al. 2012). Furthermore, male populist candidates often display higher levels of narcissism compared to their female counterparts. On another note, incumbent populists appear to exhibit traits such as narcissism, psychopathy, and

Machiavellianism, while those in the opposition are observed to be more extroverted than their counterparts in government (Nai and Martinez i Coma 2019).

In general, much remains to be examined regarding the relationship between personality and populist attitudes or the predisposition to support populist parties. Although scholars have shed light on the interaction between personality traits and populist attitudes at the individual level, studies targeting the elite level are in short supply. Potential future research could scrutinize the personality traits of elites and determine whether these traits influence their populist attitudes, thus creating a basis for comparison with citizens/voters. Potential future research could also focus on examining the personality traits of both citizens and elites, including survey items related to populist attitudes, voting intention and voting records (of individuals) or party identity (of candidates and elected officials), paving the way for studying whether populist voters share similar personality characteristics as the politicians they vote or intend to vote for. Indeed, studies such as those conducted by Selfhout et al. (2010) and Caprara and Zimbardo (2004) suggest a degree of congruity between party leaders or candidates and their supporters. This suggests the probability of voters more inclined towards politicians possessing personalities that align with their own.

THE POPULIST CITIZEN

A novel pathway in populism research studies the so-called ‘populist citizen’, meaning those citizens who possess considerable levels of populist attitudes. In general, scholars find that populist attitudes are widespread among citizens and in a sense ‘intrinsic to democracy’ (Hawkins et al. 2012: 24), even though they are not always salient. A broad scholarship shows that widespread failures of democratic governance – such as misrepresentation, intentional abuse of power or corruption – create a political context that ‘activates’ populist sentiments and renders populist appeals more sensible.

While this strand of populism research is young, most studies find that populist citizens are likely to prefer democracy to other forms of government, but they also tend to be more dissatisfied with the actual implementation of democracy. Even more, research shows that as citizens’ dissatisfaction with liberal democracy grows, their populist sentiments also become stronger. Thus, while populist citizens are self-professed democrats, they are more accurately described as ‘dissatisfied democrats’ (Rovira Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert 2020).

There is a growing consensus among scholars that populist citizens’ dissatisfaction is primarily related to the representational capacity of governing elites. As governments today are not only accountable to the people but to an increasing number of domestic and international actors, their commitment and responsiveness to the needs of citizens is considerably limited. They are further constrained by institutional checks and balances, decisions made by previous administrations and increasingly limited resources (Mair 2009). As a result, contemporary governments have largely shifted away from their role as representatives of the people, becoming more like governors, thus leaving large sections of the electorate feeling un(der)represented and distrustful of established and traditional political parties.

Populists exploit these tensions between the representative and responsible roles of governments (Mair 2009) by refocusing attention on representing the views and needs of citizens and away from parties’ institutional activities. It is these tensions between the redemptive and pragmatic faces of democracy – between the ideas that democracy is the promise of

a better world through action by the sovereign people versus a set of rules and institutions to peacefully cope with conflicts – ‘which provide the stimulus to the populist mobilization that follows democracy like a shadow’ (Canovan 1999: 10). This same desire for salvation and representation is also reflected in the profile of the populist citizen. Scholars find that populist citizens are particularly frustrated by out-of-touch elites (Van Hauwaert, Schimpf and Dandoy 2019). They feel that political leadership – which shifted toward a rich and highly educated elite – have neglected their democratic commitments to average citizens, while simultaneously promoting the interests of the ‘few’ over those of the ‘many’ (Wike and Schumacher 2020). Populist citizens feel that their governments do not share their concerns or have their best interests at heart.

Not surprisingly, then, populist citizens are characterized by a distrust of politicians and political institutions, as well as a general dissatisfaction with the status quo. Populist citizens want a ‘different’ democracy with genuine political alternatives (Manucci 2021). Yet, as it stands, we know relatively little about the exact nature of the change desired by populist citizens. While many studies find that populist citizens are more likely to support direct democracy, referendums and deliberative forms of participation, such as citizen juries and town hall meetings, much remains unexplored (but, see Wegscheider et al. 2023). Some scholars point out that just because populist citizens value democracy does not automatically mean they actually enjoy participating in politics. In fact, it could well be that populist citizens support direct democracy merely to overcome the power of the elite (Mudde 2004: 559). Similarly, this could explain why some (especially right-wing) populists tend to support a strong, decisive leader who claims to represent the will of the majority. For now, this all remains speculative, however.

Furthermore, in Europe, populist attitudes are often associated with Euroscepticism (Kneuer 2019). Although, as Harmsen (2010) has argued, Euroscepticism is not a sub-set of populism, because there are several discourses that are critical towards the European Union which cannot be classified as populist, there are many recent studies focusing on the association between populism and Euroscepticism. For instance, in a recent report (Stavrakakis et al. 2022) it is shown that among Greek citizens, populist attitudes are significantly correlated with Euroscepticism.

In general, much remains to be examined about the characteristics of populist citizens for a number of reasons. First, scholars often use different scales to measure populist sentiments among the public, which makes comparisons more complicated. Second, valid generalizations tend to require large-scale comparative studies. Because this entails considerable resources, country-specific case studies and small-scale comparisons are more common in the field. While naturally useful for theory generation and to inspire further research, it is less appropriate to extract generalizations about populist citizens – especially cross-continental ones – based solely on such studies. This applies particularly to research on the demographics of populist citizens, as these tend to be highly sensitive to national contexts, as well as the type of populist supply. As it stands, one of the few shared socio-demographic identifiers of populist potential across continents is living outside one’s capital region (Rovira Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert 2020), thereby highlighting that populist citizens tend to be less cosmopolitan and live further away from the country’s geopolitical centre.

THE POPULIST SUPPORTER/VOTER

A lot more research is available on populist voters, or individuals who support populist parties. While much of their characteristics overlap, it is important to distinguish populist supporters from populist citizens because not all populist citizens vote for populist parties or even vote at all. In fact, studies show that individuals who are more populist are not necessarily more likely to vote. Equally, not all populist party supporters vote for populist parties because they possess high levels of populist attitudes. While populist attitudes are indeed strong predictors of support for populist parties, there are various other reasons why citizens may support populist parties. Most notably, previous findings highlight that ideological convictions and policy preferences are equally important drivers of support for populist parties (Arzheimer 2009; Ramiro 2016). As such, it is important to separate these two interrelated but distinct explanations of populism.

Like populist citizens, populist supporters are on average more dissatisfied with democracy and mistrustful of the establishment than non-populist party supporters. However, contrary to popular beliefs, populist party supporters are not apolitical and not more volatile than mainstream party supporters. Moreover, large-scale comparative studies show that both left- and right-wing populist party supporters tend to engage more outside the electoral arena. Thus, while populist supporters may be disenchanted with mainstream parties and politics, they are far from politically disengaged. Instead of being fickle, their support tends to be unwavering and consistent.

Another common misconception about populist supporters relates to their levels of political awareness. While some populist supporters might be driven by feelings of discontent and resentment (van Kessel et al. 2021), most populist supporters are neither apathetic nor unaware of political developments (Van Hauwaert and van Kessel 2018). Studies have shown that populist party supporters actually tend to be politically knowledgeable, informed and interested (van Kessel et al. 2021). This directly contradicts the idea that populist voters are merely vessels mobilized by charismatic leaders for protest votes.

Regarding their democratic profile, there is quite some disagreement in the literature. While populist supporters across Europe tend to favour instruments of direct democracy – particularly referendums with a binding character – and deliberative democracy – such as participatory budgeting and advisory citizens' forums – populist supporters in Anglo-Saxon countries do not necessarily favour referendums more than other voters (Bowler et al. 2017). What most studies agree upon is that not all populist supporters are uniform in their attitudes towards democratic reform. Some populist supporters see direct citizen participation as a way to ensure their problems are solved, while others do not want to be ruled by 'the man in the street' and accept that this will have to be done by a remarkable leader (Mudde 2004).

While most studies show that the demographics of populist supporters are quite similar to those of populist citizens, there is some disagreement between them. In general, scholars find that the 'losers of globalization' description applies to both populist citizens and supporters, at least across Europe. That is, they tend to be less educated, older, male and live in rural areas (Arzheimer 2009). However, these findings are not always consistent. Recent studies highlight that left-wing populist voters are more likely to be educated, urban middle-class citizens, for example. Altogether, Rooduijn's (2018) comprehensive study of populist supporters across Western Europe demonstrates that there is no consistent proof that populist supporters are more likely to be unemployed, have lower incomes, come from lower classes or hold a lower

education, thereby suggesting that ‘the’ populist supporter simply does not exist. As an explanation, some scholars point to the importance of relativity. They argue that populism is so widespread – transcending the socio-economic ladder – because it is based on relative rather than absolute positions in society: socio-economic positions relative to others, the outlook for a positive future relative to the past and the relative causes of dissatisfaction. While this approach could explain the socio-demographic discrepancies among populist supporters of populist parties, further research is needed to obtain a more conclusive and comprehensive account of their differences and similarities between countries.

CONCLUSION

The main task of this chapter was to present the new research pathways that have been paved by studying populism through survey instruments. This approach enables scholars to measure populism as an attitude and interpret populism as an individual-level construct that can be observed amongst people. The study of populism through surveys has opened various other research paths as a direct consequence. For instance, scholars can use the same populist items in both voter and elite surveys and estimate the voter/elite congruence on the populism scale, conduct web experiments to explore the factors that may have an impact on populist attitudes, study the link between populist attitudes and personality traits and explore the profile of populist citizens and populist voters.

In this chapter we also presented scholarship on populist personality traits. Some scholars argue that people with clear populist predispositions are open to new (populist) experiences and have higher levels of conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, political cynicism and extroversion. However, other scholars posit the opposite relationship, most notably arguing that individuals who score low on agreeableness and neuroticism are more likely to support populist parties because they are distrustful of others and are receptive of the populist anti-establishment message.

In addition, this chapter included scholarship about the so-called populist citizen. Populist citizens do not necessarily support or vote for a populist party or a populist candidate. In fact, various scholars show that widespread failures of democratic governance and political crises create a political framework that ‘activates’ populist sentiments and renders populist appeals more sensible. Scholarship on populism shows that populist citizens are likely to prefer democracy to other forms of government, but they also tend to be more dissatisfied with the actual implementation of democracy by the governing elites.

Although populist citizens and populist supporters/voters may share some characteristics, it is worth distinguishing citizens who hold populist attitudes from those who may or may not hold the same attitudes but vote for a populist party as well. It is worth mentioning that, although populist attitudes are strong predictors of support for populist parties, ideological convictions and policy preferences are also important levers of support. The literature draws attention to the fact that both populist citizens and populist supporters are dissatisfied with democracy and mistrustful of the establishment. Moreover, contrary to previous beliefs, populist party supporters are neither apolitical and more volatile than mainstream party supporters nor apathetic or unaware of political developments.

In general, much remains to be examined about populism as a personality trait, attitude or predisposition. Although scholars have examined personality traits in relation to the populist

attitudes of citizens, the elite level remains understudied, which – in turn – hampers a comparative analysis of populists on the demand and supply sides. Further research is also needed on the characteristics of populist citizens and populist voters/supporters using the same scales to measure populist sentiments among the public in order to obtain a more conclusive and comprehensive description of their differences and similarities between countries.

NOTES

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2. ‘Big Five’ is a typology of personality traits used in psychological research. The five components of the Big Five personality traits scale are emotional stability/neuroticism, extroversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness (McCrae and John 1992).

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PART VI

COMPARISONS AND TYPOLOGIES

29. Left and right

María Esperanza Casullo

INTRODUCTION

This chapter's goal is to map the main contemporary theories and debates around left and right populism. To do so in a clear and systematic way is somewhat of a challenge. On the one hand, there is a nascent consensus on populism being a 'distinct form of politics' (Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis 2019: 6). This form can be characterized as a type of discourse (Laclau 2005), a logic (Prentoulis 2021), a frame (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2021), a bodily style (Moffitt 2016), a strategy (Weyland 2017) or a thin ideology (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). All these approaches, however, share a view of populism as *a way of doing politics* that can be combined with different contents. If this is indeed the case, differentiating between left and right populism should be straightforward, and the main debate should only be about the most suitable methods.

However, the consensus regarding the issue is thinner than one might expect. Grounds for substantive disagreement remain, not only on issues of method, but on the very existence of the object of study. The first section of this chapter, then, will be dedicated to answering the question of whether there are, in fact, such things as left and right populisms. Three possible answers to this question will be presented and assessed: firstly, that all populisms are necessarily republican in nature (thus 'of the left'); secondly, that all populisms are by definition illiberal, authoritarian and incompatible with democracy (thus 'of the right'); and lastly, that populism is a form of politics that can adapt to and advance diverse ideological contents.

The second section of the chapter will proceed in accord with the third position, that it makes sense to speak of right and left populisms as different varieties or embodiments of the same phenomenon. Finally, we will discuss the concept of 'punching downwards' and 'punching upwards' populism as complements to left and right. In the final section some further comments on the differences in normative weight between left populism and right populism studies are developed.

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE LEFT AND THE RIGHT AND THE FIELD OF POPULISM STUDIES

To distinguish between left and right should be easy given that these concepts are supposed to be the structuring principles of our modern political systems; however, to do so is harder than it looks. The left/right labels were coined at the time of the French Revolution, when pro-Crown delegates sat on one extreme of the Assembly and revolutionaries on the other. Later, the left came to be identified with pro-working-class parties or movements, especially Marxist ones. The right, broadly speaking, became identified with conservative parties or movements, those that were associated with the elite and sought to sustain prevailing hierarchies.

After the failure of the Soviet Union, as liberal democracy overtook the globe, and as changes in the modes of production weakened the very idea of a working class, the distinction between left and right became rather blurred. Political parties across the spectrum seemed to accept the inevitability of market relations and liberal party democracy. In a seminal text, Norberto Bobbio (2015) presented the idea that the distinction between left and right is now fundamentally about equality: the left's goal is furthering social and economic equality through political means, while the right accepts social inequality as natural, unavoidable and even desirable (Levitsky and Roberts 2012: 5). The right, moreover, feels more comfortable today with illiberalism and authoritarianism if those are instrumental in upholding social hierarchies that they see as threatened.

The question of the relation between populism and the left–right dichotomy is connected to the global geography of cases in some fundamental ways. Unlike other political phenomena, such as democracy, liberalism, constitutionalism or even parliaments, there is no valid normative definition of the concept from which to proceed deductively, and populists do not call themselves so, unlike the leaders or theorists of the modern ideological traditions of liberalism, Marxism and conservatism. Rather, scholars work inductively: spurred by their interest in real-world cases, they move towards stylized concepts. So, there are two related but distinct scholarly traditions: those that work primarily with North American and European cases, and those that do so with Latin American, Asian and African cases.

This has been the case from the very beginning of the research on populism in the modern era. The so-called ‘classic’ approach to populism was developed in response to the rise of figures like Kemal Atatürk in Turkey, Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina or Juan Francisco Velasco Alvarado in Peru. Based on these cases, political sociologists such as Seymour Martin Lipset (1959), Gino Germani (1963) and Octavio Ianni (1965) defined populism as a political movement with a base formed by newly urbanized industrial workers and a high- or middle-class leadership, which pushed for redistribution. At the end of the last century, when the whole region moved to the left again, the association of populism with the left was strengthened even more. Populist outsiders were able to capitalize on the delegitimation of traditional parties and popular anger in Venezuela (Hugo Chávez), Argentina (Néstor and Cristina Kirchner), Bolivia (Evo Morales), Ecuador (Rafael Correa) and Paraguay (Fernando Lugo). This reinforced the notion that populism is naturally, maybe even necessarily, of the left.

The reality was the opposite in the North Atlantic cases. Analysts who looked at populism through a European, or even North American (plus Australia and New Zealand) lens, from the 1980s onwards have tended to downplay the distributive and economic aspects of populism while focusing on its nativism, xenophobia and paranoid nationalism.

This does not mean that, for example, all European populisms are right wing or that all Latin American populists are or were leftist. That is not the case. The success of neoliberal South American populists like Carlos Menem (Argentina) and Alberto Fujimori (Peru) was one of the causes behind the creation of the category of ‘neoliberal populism’ in the 1990s (Weyland 1999). More recently, former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro has also given credence to the idea that right-wing populism is a viable option in the Latin American context. Similarly, left-wing populism has existed, and even thrived, in the North Atlantic. Europe saw a surge of left populism in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008–2009. Parties like SYRIZA (Greece) and Podemos (Spain) and leaders like Jeremy Corbyn (United Kingdom) sought to channel the anger of the ‘Indignados’ movements against austerity measures pushed by the

European Central Bank and the propping up of private banks. The appearance of viable left populist experiments, like Podemos and Corbynism, reinvigorated European research on the topic. The growing awareness of the multiplicity of populist embodiments has pushed the whole field into greater refinement and robustness. Many ground-breaking works have subsequently focused on questions such as: What is *truly* populism? How can its political form be distinguished from its ideological content? And what conditions might explain the difference in outcomes?

IS POPULISM NECESSARILY FROM THE LEFT OR FROM THE RIGHT?

As stated at the beginning of the chapter, the idea that populism is ‘a *form* of political discourse, performance, or strategy’ (Vergara 2019: 222, emphasis added) has become as close to a consensus as is possible in the contentious sub-field of populism studies. Ernesto Laclau’s formulation in *On Populist Reason* was extremely influential in this respect, arguing that while populist antagonism serves an ‘ontological’ function, its particular ‘ontic contents’ are ultimately contingent and ‘this function can be performed by signifiers of an entirely opposite political sign’ (Laclau 2005: 87). If this is true, then it would be correct to speak of left and right populisms.

However, there are two possible objections to this argument. The first states that populism in itself is fundamentally plebeian and republican (McCormick 2001) and, as such, it is necessarily counterhegemonic; for this vision, speaking of ‘right’ populism is a misnomer. For Camila Vergara, populism is necessarily plebeian, as it ‘springs from the politicisation of wealth inequality in reaction to systemic corruption and the immiseration of the masses, an attempt to balance the scales of social and political power between the ruling elite and the popular sectors’ (2019: 239). Jorge Alemán (2016: 25) goes even further and identifies populism with the condition of possibility of a collective transformative will and, as such, as coetaneous with democracy. ‘Plebeian’ populist movements share three characteristics: they involve (1) coalitions of support based on ‘those who experience deteriorating material conditions to the point of oppression and whose interests are not being represented by traditional parties’ (Vergara 2019: 240); (2) a populist leader ‘who delivers emancipation from socioeconomic oppression’ (Vergara 2019: 229); and (3) a set of policies that seek to ‘improve not only the material conditions of the popular sectors through redistribution via land reform, progressive taxation, subsidies, and public goods, but also to increase the symbolic and political status of the masses’ (Vergara 2019: 229).

According to this approach, what is usually referred to as ‘right-wing populism’ should instead be recognized as ethno-nationalism, or even as something closer to the classical idea of totalitarianism (Vergara 2019: 243). Therefore, according to this approach, the category of populism should be reserved for what are usually called left-wing populisms.

The position stating that the term populism should be reserved for plebeian, redistributive movements has gained momentum in the last few years, but it is still in the minority. The inverse position has historically moved close to being hegemonic in the field of populism studies, although it is arguably losing ground of late. This is the approach that considers populism to be fundamentally illiberal, anti-democratic and oppressive and, as such, it expects all populisms to be, or end up being, right wing.

Many books and articles share this approach; among them, the works of Jan-Werner Müller (2016), Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2019), Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin (2018) and Loris Zanatta (2018). These authors (and many others) seem to share Müller's view that: 'In addition to being antielitist, populists are always antipluralist. Populists claim that they, and they alone, represent the people' (2016: 3). In this view, while some historical examples of populism might seem to be born out of the struggles of the dispossessed classes against elitist oppression, and while those might have had some successes in redistributing resources and expanding some political rights, all these elements are ultimately an unsustainable mirage. Sooner or later, when push comes to shove, the totalizing tendencies of populist mobilization and the personalistic style of leadership will collide with pluralism, liberalism and ultimately democracy (Stankov 2021; Wodak 2015; Zanatta 2018). Óscar García Agustín sums up the most pessimistic position (which he does not share): 'from this perspective, there is no distinction between right and left, given that both sides question the essence of liberal democracy: the representative system and the constitutional and institutional realm' (2020: 2).

So, in this view, any differences between left and right populism in terms of their economic and social policies (distributive or neoliberal, inclusive or exclusive, republican or nostalgic) are dwarfed by populism's overpowering tendencies towards illiberalism, anti-pluralism and even totalization.

POPULISM: FORM AND CONTENT

However, these two contrasting positions (that populism is necessarily left versus that populism necessarily ends up being right) do not occupy the mainstream of populism studies. As stated at the beginning of the chapter, most authors researching the ideological dimensions of populism seem to agree on the fundamental insight that populism is *a way of doing politics* that can be used to advance different worldviews.

Three authors have been most instrumental in articulating this idea. Margaret Canovan has stated that: 'The many different ways in which the people, their interests and their antagonisms have been conceived make it futile to try to identify populism with any particular programme or social base' and that:

populist mobilizations are usually linked to populist economic grievances of some kind; they normally have some sort of cultural dimension concerned with defending the people's values, and they are invariably political, claiming power for the people. Each one of these themes allows for a range of variations, while the various themes have themselves been intermingled *in many different ways*. (2005: 80, emphasis added)

Laclau presents the problem in similar terms, suggesting that scholars are often confronted with the following dilemma: 'either to restrict populism to one of its historical variants, or to attempt a general definition which will always be too narrow' (2005: 17). Elsewhere, he explicitly states that 'the language of populist discourse' can be 'Left or Right' (2005: 118). Chantal Mouffe (2019) brings greater detail to the notion in her description of the processes by which the populist logic was instrumental in solidifying a neoliberal hegemony during the 1980s, while trying to delineate the possibilities for a new leftist hegemony through the use of similar tools.

While restricting the use of the term populism to only the left or the right is a valid choice, affirming the distinction between form and content in populism opens up the scope of the field in terms of the possible comparisons of cases and categories.

LEFT AND RIGHT POPULISM

If one agrees with the position that populism is something like a form, strategy or articulation, that is connected to, but not identical to, a given ideology or set of policy preferences, then the next issue becomes how to differentiate between right populism and left populism. To establish the difference between right and left populism is at the same time an easy task and a seemingly impossible one. On the one hand, it seems intuitively self-evident that movements like Venezuelan *Chavismo*, Argentine *Kirchnerismo*, the Bolivian Movimiento al Socialismo or the Spanish Podemos are different from cases like Viktor Orbán, Donald Trump or Giorgia Meloni. However, none of these movements was or is trying to follow a pre-set socialist or conservative model; on the contrary, programmatic eclecticism is a feature, not a bug, in populist articulation.

Left populisms can and do pursue policies which look ‘right’. For instance, some Latin American populists such as Rafael Correa and Hugo Chávez shared a paternalistic and traditional view of gender roles, which precluded them from pushing for abortion rights (see Dingler and Lefkofridi 2021). Conversely, right-wing populists engage in ‘welfare chauvinism’ and demand further expansion of social benefits, if only for ‘the right people’ (Greve 2019). Right populisms have learnt to articulate some elements of traditional ‘left’ discourse, like claiming to defend the economic rights of the industrial working class against a predatory financial elite. Economic discourse also usually defines populism as fundamentally unsound in fiscal terms. Petar Stankov (2021), however, finds an inconclusive relation between fiscal discipline and populist and non-populist governments.

Most analysts agree, then, that it is not possible to identify one single ‘policy menu’ as the defining characteristic of populism. It is possible, however, to anchor the distinction in their orientation towards equality (Levitsky and Roberts 2012: 5). Left populisms seek to promote ‘equality and social justice’ (García Agustín 2020: 10), and ‘whereas the left champions a more equal society, the right deems inequality not only inevitable, but also legitimate’ (Katsambekis and Kioupiolis 2019: 12). Equality in this sense goes beyond economic equality to include political equality and expanded participation (García Agustín 2020: 10). But the orientation towards equality or inequality must be understood as a very general *perspective for action* and not as a commitment with a clearly delineated and cohesive ideological government programme. Also, there are several dimensions to equality: the socio-economic one probably comes to mind first, but the demands for ethnic and racial, gender and sexual diversity equality have become as central, if not more, as basic social justice (Barros and Prado 2020).

ANTAGONISM, NOT PROGRAMME

Left populism and right populism are not so easily distinguished by their programmes or modes of organization. Movements that started as anti-elitist, redemptive and strongly popular might evolve into authoritarian experiences, such as Venezuelan *Chavismo*. Right-wing pop-

ulisms have adopted and learned to wield some tropes of the twenty-first-century left, such as anti-corruption rhetoric (Donald Trump's 'Drain the swamp!' slogan) or the rejection of neoliberal free market tropes.

However, there is no denying that left and right cases do not 'look alike'. In fact, case studies reveal two main discursive repertoires which are quite distinct. They can be called 'punching up' and 'punching down'. All populisms are antagonistic. They are usually anti-elitist; however, while antagonism can be presented as the 'low' rising against the 'high' and educated (Ostiguy 2017), the identification of the other of populism with 'the elite' is by no means universal or automatic. There are broadly two definitional possibilities: one in which the elite is defined as 'those above' in socio-economic terms (financial sectors, businessmen, large agricultural or cattle owners, banks, large media) – always of course articulated or functional to foreign interests. They are the 'rich and powerful', the oligarchy, the bourgeoisie and, in this respect, they are closer to the traditional Marxist or leftist definition of the adversary.

In the 'downward-punching' paradigm, the main adversary is not located above, but rather below and outside: it is the foreigner, the alien, an external contaminant that threatens the purity of the true, simple, God-loving people. Usually, there is an elite component that is allied or complicit with the foreigners: intellectuals, liberals, feminists, 'East Coast intellectuals', Euro-bureaucrats. However, they are not the primary source of antagonism. This particular repertoire is closely related to the more extreme right-wing ideologies, and very compatible with them.

Ideology is secondary to antagonism: it might make sense, for instance, for a certain leader to combine distributive policies but reject feminist demands for reproductive rights when those demands are said to be supported by the upper and most educated classes if the goal is not to be seen as 'of the left' but to antagonize 'those above'. Conversely, anti-neoliberal sentiment might be compatible with right-wing rhetoric if neoliberalism is equated with technocrats and international bureaucracies.

However, it is important to note that research on these topics must take the fundamental hybridity, flexibility and situational nature of populism into account. Populist leaders, movements and governments might move from one strategy to the other rapidly, sometimes even to the point of self-contradiction.

A COMPARISON OF APPROACHES

As a way of summarizing the state of the art on the research on left/right populism, I have built a comparative matrix for five widely read approaches: ideational, discursive, political performance, political strategy and frame: the ideational approach defines populism as a thin-centred ideology that pits the people against the elite and is Manichean and moralistic (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017); the discursive approach defines it as social discourse that creates *a people* through the dichotomization of the political space into an 'us' and a 'them', in which the figure of the leader (in most cases) or a common identity or another 'empty signifier' becomes the signifier for the 'us' (Laclau 2005; Panizza, 2005); the political performance approach centres on the public performances of leaders that mobilize cultural signifiers of the 'low' and vulgar and act out anti-elitism (Moffitt 2016; Petrović-Lotina 2021); the political strategy approach focuses on the way in which political entrepreneurs establish direct relation with constituents and bypass established parties (Weyland 2017); and the frame approach

reviews the tropes and interpretative frames that populist leaders use to persuade the public (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2021).

As is plain to see, there is ample diversity in the scope, definitions and methods used by each one of these schools of thought. Because studies on populism are ‘flavoured’ by their inductive genesis, scholars of the Global South and Latin America in particular tend to view populism as connected with strong leaders and the left, while those from Europe and the United States see it as linked to movements and parties, and with a much higher prevalence of right-wing cases. Because of this diversity, researchers might find one or the other more naturally suitable for different objects of study. Table 29.1 summarizes the core differences.

Table 29.1 Summary of approaches to populism research

	Ideational	Discourse	Political performance	Political strategy	Frame
Focus	Parties/leader	Leaders/movements	Leaders	Leaders	Leaders
Geographical origins	Originally Western Europe; now global	Originally inspired by Latin American populist leaders; now global	Global	Latin America	Western Europe
Core elements	People/elite; moral antagonism; association with other ideologies	Creation of a ‘people’ through a discourse that constructs a solidarity chain	Performance of anti-elitism, bad manners, performance of crisis	Rejection of parties, direct relation with masses	A frame in which the people are in need of defending and that promises radical change
Compatibility with liberalism	Ultimately, no	Possible, if tensioned	Problematic, but possible	Problematic, but not impossible	Possible
Inclusive/exclusive	Ultimately exclusive	Inclusive, or at least heterogeneous	Possibilities for inclusion	Ultimately exclusive	Possibilities for inclusion
Views populism as more naturally of the...	Right	Left	Left and right	Left	Right

As can be inferred from the above summary, some of the approaches were originally developed in close connection with one particular set of cases, and therefore seem to be employed more frequently for a given region. For instance, South American left populisms, and Peronism in particular, informed some of the writings of Laclau and Mouffe, who are considered to be the founders of the discursive approach. Laclau’s influential book, *On Populist Reason*, was published in 2005, when the wave of left South American populism was reaching its apex, and was a theoretical response to it. Mouffe, on her part, sought to develop an explicitly programmatic framework with *For a Left Populism* (2019). It is thus not surprising that many of the writings on the possibilities and limits of the left populist experience are oriented by her work. On the other side of the spectrum, the first works of Mudde (2007) were born out of his research on populist radical right parties in Western Europe, and it is not a surprise that this approach has been widely utilized to look at parties at the right end of the spectrum.

One must not take this logic to the extreme, however. As the ‘ideational’ approach became more popular, other researchers expanded and adapted the ensuing definitions and methods using them to analyse a wide variety of cases, left and right, from all corners of the globe (Hawkins et al. 2019; Hellman 2017 for East Asia, for instance). The same happened with the

Laclauian approach, which is now being applied to left and right populism alike (i.e. Palonen 2018). The so-called performative approach has been applied to an equal number of left-wing (see Mbete 2021) and right-wing (see Baykan 2021; Aiolfi 2022) cases.

NORMATIVE IMPLICATIONS

A central cleavage between the different traditions is the issue of populism's compatibility with democracy and liberalism. Scholars that focus on left populism or 'upward-punching populism' see them as compatible, at least as a possibility. As stated, some view populism as republican and democratic in essence (Biglieri and Cadahia 2021; Vergara 2019); not necessarily liberal, but certainly not illiberal. Populism is seen as connected with the mobilization of the *demos*, the *plebs*, within the public space, to fight the status quo; therefore, it would be incorrect to use the term 'populism' to refer to political regimes that are fundamentally preoccupied with maintaining or even strengthening social hierarchies. Thus, a significant number of scholars of left populism tend to be sympathetic, if not to the actual historical examples, at least to the project of left populism as a feasible political project to be theorized and/or improved. Giorgos Venizelos and Yannis Stavrakakis (2022), for instance, offer a rigorous attempt to clarify the two distinct components of left populism. The *left* part has to do with three dimensions of inclusion and exclusion: the material dimensions ('who is included/excluded from the material redistribution of resources'); the political dimension ('who is included/excluded from processes of participation and social rights'); and the symbolic dimension ('who is included/excluded from the symbolic and cultural pillars of a community') (2022: 4). The *populism* dimension has to do with the 'formation of a salient *collective identification* through which heterogeneous social demands and exclusions find a way to establish links allowing them to challenge effectively the status quo'; people-centrism and anti-elitism play a central role in the articulation (2022: 3).

Marina Prentoulis defines populism as a 'logic that divides the political space into two camps and challenges the establishment (electorally or in the streets, peacefully or not)' (2021: 4); left populism in this view is 'a serious attempt to find what is in the best interest of the majority, the 99 percent' (2021: 5). Prentoulis (2021: 32) and García Agustín (2020: 10) view three key characteristics as key to left populism: transversality, inclusiveness and participation. Even Mudde acknowledged that 'some parties are best classified as social populists... social populism combines socialism and populism, and is thus a form of left-wing populism' (Mudde 2007: 48).

Many of the more hopeful readings of populism seem to be focused on the possibilities of truly global or transnational populist movements, which are less associated with leaders and national borders (Aslanidis 2018). Mark Devenney (2020) speaks of 'transnation' to characterize the current moment, when there is a nascent transnational people 'struggling with translation beyond the adscription of nationalist politics', but it is not fully developed yet; García Agustín (2020) claims that populism must come up with a definition of sovereignty that is 'not only limited to the nation state' (2020: 70), and Alexandros Kioupiolis (2019) explores diffused, 'bottom-up' movements under the term 'populism 2.0'.

On the contrary, students of right populism do not share any type of normative disposition towards the topic. One might even say that they are mostly concerned or even repulsed by real-world examples of right-wing populism. Thus, most debates drawing on this tradition

seem to be focused on the threat it presents to the democratic order, and how to counterbalance or avoid them. The stronger consensus on the anti-democratic effects of right populism is predicated on the stronger conceptual overlapping between the core issues of right-wing populism. Mudde's definition, that understands parties and movements that fall under that category as sharing a common 'ideological core' that combines nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde 2007: 22) comes close to highlighting the two elements that are seen as more pervasive: nationalism and personalist authoritarianism.

Even so, there are definitional debates around the notion of right-wing populism itself. A salient one is how to distinguish between right-wing populism and fascism, and how to define the border or frontier between the two. Federico Finchelstein, for instance, argues that populism and fascism represent 'alternative political and historical trajectories', while being 'genealogically connected' (2017: 6), since they both appear out of contexts of crisis and see themselves as the one 'true' form of democracy. However, for Finchelstein, a frontier can be set: if populism moves from 'rhetorical enmity' to 'practices of enemy identification and persecution', one might recognize that as fascism (2017: 6). The step that goes from discursive and electoral antagonism to actual, physical violence and persecution seems to be an accepted boundary (see also de la Torre 2021).

One interesting issue is that, while scholars of left populism view the apparition of a global internationalist left populism as a project which is desirable but not yet realized, students of the right present the case that global right-wing networks seem to be stronger, in an undesirable manner. Jens Rydgren (2005: 413) and Dani Rodrik (2021), among others, have written about such 'international diffusion'.

Thus, the different orientations towards the normative possibilities of left and right populism with regard to democracy should be taken into account when making sense of both sub-fields.

CONCLUSION

This chapter presented three different perspectives on the issue of populism and the left–right dichotomy. First, it argued that all populisms are by nature plebeian, republican and, thus, of the left. Second, it suggesting that all populisms are totalizing and antagonistic and are, eventually, of the right. Third, it stipulated that populism is a form of politics that can adapt to and advance diverse ideological contents.

Starting with the first two perspectives, the projects advocating for letting go of the notions of 'left populism' or 'right populism' in favour of opposing populism to fascism, or populism to liberal democracy, seems overly reductive. For one thing, if one only calls 'populist' those examples that expand popular rights and strive for greater emancipation, one runs the risk of being seen as engaging in methodological cherry-picking by choosing to call populists only those cases that one considers to be 'good'. However, there is no denying that some movements that started as popular and plebeian (like Venezuelan Chavismo) became hierarchical and even authoritarian. Theorists need to take these cases seriously. It is necessary to be able to say something more than that they were never populists to begin with. On the other hand, the identification of populism with authoritarianism is also reductive, since it cannot see the impact of at least some populist experiences on the lives of popular classes, might misjudge the causes of their support and might also help to legitimate repressive anti-populist actions.

In addition, most analysts see elements that connect together populist examples from opposite points of the political spectrum: ways of speaking, acting and organizing; certain templates for explaining the world; a fighting, antagonistic spirit; and certain anti-elitist obsessions. As much as one might argue that they must be regarded as completely different from one another, it is unlikely that people would do so.

The third position has to do with viewing populism as a political form (a template, a frame, a type of discourse or strategy) that can be combined with almost infinite ideological contents. There is value in this proposition, since it broadens the universe of cases which might be compared and the criteria involved in such comparisons. However, maybe left and right do not capture the whole story. The concepts of ‘punching upwards’ and ‘punching downwards’ populism were thus introduced to complement this perspective. These categories emphasize that the antagonism towards a social other, which is either defined as the wealthy and powerful ‘up’ or the menacing and foreign ‘down’, structures policy preferences in ways that cannot be explained solely by the left–right dichotomy.

Finally, a few thoughts were presented on the different normative approaches to left and right populisms. While scholars that focus on the left cases (which are often taken from Latin America or the Global South, although recently also from Europe) are more sympathetic to the emancipatory potential of left populist movements, especially in their global or transnational possibilities, academics that study right populism view it as a fundamental threat to contemporary democracies. Somewhat paradoxically, the global connections of the right are viewed as a key component in this threat.

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30. In opposition and in government

Giorgos Venizelos and Grigoris Markou

INTRODUCTION

Populism in government is not a new phenomenon. In Latin America populist governments constitute the norm rather than the exception. However, in Europe and the United States (US), where populism has traditionally been a force of the opposition, populism's transition from protest to power has challenged theoretical hypotheses expecting populism to remain in opposition. Furthermore, the durability of some populist administrations challenged the view that populism is episodic and short-lived.

Indeed, the transition of various populists from opposition to power in liberal democracies over the last decade has triggered numerous academic and public discussions. Generally viewed as a threat to liberal democracy and its institutions, populism's ascendance to power has alarmed scholars and journalists who maintained that it could override democratic procedures, establish new constitutions and inflict harm on human rights (Müller 2016: 62; Pappas 2019; Urbinati 2019).

Does populism constitute a threat to liberal democratic norms and institutions when moving from opposition to power? How do populists fare in opposition and in power? Do they maintain their populist characteristics embedded in their discursive-performative operations? Do they manage to implement policy when in office? And, finally, do they succeed in sustaining passionate identification with 'the people'? These are questions with which our chapter deals, aiming to further elucidate the discussion on populism's transition to power.

The first section of the chapter reviews the dominant approaches to populism in opposition and in power. The second section provides an overview of populist phenomena in opposition and power around the world, on both the left and right of the political spectrum – highlighting their main discursive and performative features, their records and trajectories in power. The third section discusses the profound differences among diverse typologies of populism and puts under the spotlight the distinct relationship they have with democracy, the impact they are likely to have on representative institutions, their capabilities to govern as well as their 'fate' in power. The chapter concludes that these issues may be rather influenced by factors that are *external* to populism – such as ideology, political-historical circumstances and institutional resistance.

THEORIES OF POPULISM IN OPPOSITION AND IN POWER

A review of the relevant literature identifies three overarching approaches with respect to populism's ambivalent relationship with power (Venizelos 2023). A first widely endorsed view maintains that once in government, populist parties fail to materialize their promises and are ultimately co-opted by the institutions of the state, eventually turning into mainstream parties (Mudde 2017). According to such a hypothesis, populism's radical and antagonistic profile is

expected to become normalized once in power, as its *political* or ‘revolutionary’ dimension fades away. Politics, thus, turns into ‘business as usual’ and the populist promise is betrayed. Adopting such an orientation, Mény and Surel (2002: 18) argued that ‘populist parties are by nature neither durable nor sustainable parties of government. Their fate is to be integrated into the mainstream, to disappear, or to remain permanently in opposition’. Their view resonates with that of Taggart (2002: 62; 2004: 285), who understands populism as an episodic phenomenon, with short-term scope and limited potential. In a similar vein, Canovan (1999: 12) suggested that when a populist actor ‘actually gets into power, its own inability to live up to its promises will be revealed’. Failure is often thought of in terms of policy implementation, and is specifically determined through populists’ (in)capacity to realize their electoral promises (see Loew and Faas 2019; Sachs 1989). According to Heinisch, ‘significant structural weaknesses inherent in populist parties pose nearly insurmountable problems that make their long-term success in government questionable’ (2003: 92).

The assumption that populism is necessarily in contradiction with the institutions of political governance seems to be grounded in a theorization of populism as an intrinsically oppositional force – and not a force of government. Dominant theoretical frameworks seem to connect populism with political outsiders, challenger parties and protest movements (Zulianello 2019). For this reason, mainstream political discourse views populism as a metaphor for *anti-politics*. As such, the anti-elitist dimension of populism is overemphasized at the expense of its people-centric dimension – i.e. its ability to interpellate and construct collective identities. Importantly, an understanding of populism as a feature of the opposition neglects the plethora of populist governments that historically abound, especially in Latin America. Indeed, populists in government may fail to implement their agendas and still remain in office. Failure to achieve their goals may not be intrinsic to the fact that they are populists. Other exogenous factors – such as contingent political developments at the national or international level – may provide distinct opportunity structures that influence populists’ plans in government. Besides, the same applies to non-populists.

However, there are accounts that argue that populists can survive the experience of government; undergoing, perhaps, significant organizational changes and facing substantial ideological discounts (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015). In essence, populism is understood to be moderated once in power. The issue with this approach, though, is that the focus of the analysis lies on the *ideological* dimension that accompanies populism (i.e. socialism) and not on its *form* – what Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) call the ‘thin ideology’ of populism – revolving around people-centrism and anti-elitism (Stavrakakis et al. 2017; Venizelos and Stavrakakis 2022).

A second approach advocates that populism in government turns authoritarian. Müller, a prominent voice in this respect, argues that ‘Populists can govern as populists’ (2016: 4). In his view, ‘populist governance exhibits three features: attempts to hijack the state apparatus, corruption and “mass clientelism” (trading material benefits or bureaucratic favours for political support by citizens who become the populists’ “clients”), and efforts systematically to suppress civil society’ (2016: 4). For Müller, the essence of populist governance involves the occupation of the state and the intimidation of political enemies (2016: 45). Similarly, Pappas suggests that ‘without exception, populists in office have tried to enlarge the state and fill government jobs with political supporters in order to expand the populist leader and party’s control over crucial institutions’ (2019: 73). ‘In the end’, Pappas argues, ‘populism may turn into outright autocracy’ (2019: 74). Political theorist Nadia Urbinati’s position is

rather similar: ‘once elected, the leader feels authorised to act unilaterally and make decisions without meaningful institutional consultation or mediations’ (Urbinati 2019: 120).

More often than not, populism is understood as a threat to a liberal democratic regime. Taggart (2002: 66), for example, argues that ‘populism is hostile to representative politics’. Such a view is grounded on the conceptualization of populism as a necessarily ‘illiberal’ phenomenon (see Pappas 2019), which downgrades ‘other institutional centres of power, including the judiciary’ (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 17). Some theorists go a step further, connecting populism with fascism. Finchelstein (2017: 247) situates populism ‘somewhere between liberalism and fascism’, while Žižek (2018) sides with liberal anti-populists, claiming that populism is today’s opium for ‘the people’ and equating it with fascism (see Venizelos et al. 2019). Without downplaying the occasional interaction between populist and fascist politics, it is important to recognize the crucial differences between the two. For a start, fascism may be supported by the masses but it cancels elections once in power. It is a regime type that governs through hierarchical top-down processes, effectively cancelling the will of ‘the people’. In contrast, populists seek legitimacy through democratic and participatory processes, including referenda and repeated counting of votes in order to prove that the election of the populist leader or party is an outcome of the will of ‘the people’ (Ostiguy 2017: 83). Overall, it must be recognized that the relationship between populist and (liberal) democracy is ambivalent – with potentially positive effects on the polity such as increasing democratic participation and the incorporation of excluded sectors in the social, economic and political spheres (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017).

Critical accounts highlight that populism’s association with illiberalism and authoritarianism is rooted in the normatively loaded (pejorative) theorizations of populism (De Cleen and Glynos 2021; Galanopoulos and Venizelos 2022; Nikisianis et al. 2019; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2019). Scholarly as well as political and public discourse places populism in opposition to pluralism and democracy. Mainstream discourses often view populism as moralistic and monist, articulating a homogenizing identity of a ‘pure’ people (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2016: 81). Such definitions of populism, however, are a product of an excessive focus on the European context where radical right populism thrives. As such, a plethora of progressive and democratic, in fact paradigmatic, expressions of populism that operate outside Europe are more or less ignored (see Padoan 2021). As a consequence, ‘region-specific manifestations of populism are erroneously promoted to defining properties of supposedly general applicability’ (Aslanidis 2017: 268).

A third possibility is to approach populism through the discursive, performative/stylistic and socio-cultural perspectives (Ostiguy et al. 2021). Although distinct, these paradigms share an anti-essentialist basis: they shift focus from a particular normative (usually pejorative) meaning of populism, predicting an *a priori* negative impact on democratic institutions, policymaking processes and society (as in the two approaches outlined earlier), to its *function*; i.e. as a force that interpellates and mobilizes collective identifications (Laclau 2005). Thus, if populism in opposition is defined as a performative mode of political identification that constructs ‘the people’ – through performative, stylistic and discursive operations – then populism in power should be connected with an actor’s ability *to continue pursuing these antagonistic practices, cultivating and deepening affective bonds and ultimately maintaining (political and cultural) hegemony* (Venizelos 2023). Biglieri and Cadahia (2021) employ the term populist institutionality to describe the possibility of incorporating a contentious-equivalential style as a logic of governance. In their words, ‘the state (and institutions) become another antagonistic

space in the dispute between those on the bottom and those on the top' (Biglieri and Cadahia 2021: 67). The focus of analysis for discursive-performative approaches lies on populists' ability to pursue, or maintain, anti-establishment repertoires from institutional positions via convincingly presenting themselves as outsiders and simultaneously interpellating a collective popular subject of the excluded, many through effective conditioning (Venizelos 2023).

In juxtaposition to previous approaches defining populism in power through its (negative or positive) outcomes on the polity, or its ability (or not) to successfully implement policy, the discursive/performative approach directs the focus of the analysis back to the core operational criteria of people-centrism and anti-elitism, understood not solely as rhetoric but also as transgressive, stylistic and performative technologies that are visible in language, social markers, bodily choreographies and the overall habitus of a political actor (Casullo 2020; Ostiguy 2017; Venizelos 2022). Having reviewed the dominant theorizations of populism vis-à-vis its transition to power, the next section focuses on empirical cases around the world.

POPULISMS IN POWER: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Over the last decades, diverse populist actors have emerged around the world – on both the left and right of the political spectrum. Not all of them have been electorally successful. However, many of them have managed to establish themselves in opposition, participate in coalitions and/or even form majority governments (see Schwörer 2022). On the right-hand side of the spectrum, electoral advances for nativist right-wing populist leaders like Geert Wilders and Marine Le Pen brought them close to power in the Netherlands (2023) and France (2017, 2022), respectively. The Brexit referendum and the rise of Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom as well as the election of Donald Trump as the 45th US president could be understood as the epitome of contemporary populist rupture on the right (2016).

On the left-hand side of the spectrum, the rise of PODEMOS in Spain (2014) and Jean-Luc Mélenchon (2016) in France challenged established parties' hegemony. In Latin American countries, like Bolivia, Peru and Colombia, left populist governments arose, while in Brazil (2023) and Argentina (2019–2023) they made a comeback. Populist parties and leaderships have also participated in coalition governments, even in cases where their ideologies were not entirely aligned, or were even opposed to those of their partners – as in the coalitions between the nativist right-wing Lega and the Five Star Movement in Italy (2018), or the radical left SYRIZA and radical right ANEL in Greece (2015–2019) (Aslanidis 2021).

One of the most paradigmatic cases of populism in power has been Peronism: a historical populist movement in Argentina that, since 1945, has largely defined Argentine politics. Peronism is seen as a mass movement that cut across the left/right axis, incorporating contradictory political ideological and programmatic features. For this reason, Peronism constitutes a challenge for political and social scientists who attempt to explain its ideological profile (Ostiguy 2009: 2).

A progressive variant of Peronism, commonly known as Kirchnerism, emerged following the severe economic crisis of 2001 and the popular unrest that unfolded in the aftermath of a decade characterized by the dominance of neoliberal governments led by Carlos Menem (1989–1999) and Fernando De La Rúa (1999–2001). Led by Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007) and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015), the Frente para la Victoria (Front for Victory) alliance of the Peronist party signalled the return of progressive left populism in

Argentina (Levy 2017). The alliance was a political coalition rooted in the Peronist tradition, without strong ideological traits but rather incorporating diverse humanist and progressive ideas blended with a populist style.

Kirchnerist political discourse presented progressive and inclusionary populist features, relying on the antagonism between ‘us’ (the people) and ‘them’ (the elites). Functioning as an empty signifier in Kirchner’s and Cristina Fernández’s discourse, ‘the people’ included every Argentine citizen – the working class, the poor people in the favelas, the unemployed, indigenous and vulnerable social groups as well as many of the social movements that opposed the neoliberal policies of the 1990s. In juxtaposition, ‘the people’s’ adversaries included the political and economic elites as well as the juridical and media systems that were framed as corrupt. The formation of collective subjectivity in Kirchnerist discourse was associated with the memory of the 2001 mass uprising against the failed political recipes of the previous administrations. Such an association with past political memory helped revive and consolidate the division of the socio-political space between those at ‘the bottom’ (whom the Kirchnerists/Peronists sought to represent) and those at ‘the top’ (represented by those who had previously sided with the International Monetary Fund [IMF], the banks and the privatization of key sectors of the economy). When in power, Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007) unified social and political actors in the country by fighting against transnational economic actors (the IMF, the foreign banks, the financial ‘vultures’ and their domestic partners), while Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015) put special emphasis on the antagonism between ‘the people’ and ‘the domestic establishment’ (oligarchy, urban upper-middle classes and the media) (Ostiguy and Casullo 2017: 20–21).

Their populist style emerged as a response to the technocratic anti-populist style of rival politicians (e.g. Elisa Carrió, Mauricio Macri, etc.), attempting to give voice to marginalized sectors and incorporating them into the socio-political arena. Contrary to Argentine anti-populism, that stigmatized the poor and suffering people – as Macri’s policies against migrants and indigenous people exemplify (Markou 2021b) – Kirchnerism improved the quality of life of the vulnerable and protected human rights through social and work programmes (Familias, Manos a la Obra, Argentina Trabaja, Fútbol para Todos, Milanesa para Todos, etc.), social allowances (Asignación Universal por Jijó), inclusive policies (same-sex marriage) and human rights initiatives (Space for Memory and for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights). Despite its progressive and left-leaning vision, Kirchnerism accepted the existing politico-economic framework, advocating for the implementation of ‘human capitalism’ and declaring allegiance to the constitution of the country. Furthermore, its programme contributed to the escalation of political tension between populists and anti-populists in the country.

Another notable instance of populism in power is the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) that rose as a response to the economic crisis and its neoliberal management in Greece. It put forward a radical political and economic agenda and sought to give voice and representation to ‘the marginalized’ and ‘underprivileged’ (Katsambekis 2019; Venizelos 2020).

Populism constituted a central component in the party’s discourse and played a pivotal role in its transformation from a fringe party to a party of government (Venizelos and Stavrakakis 2022). Its effective framing – i.e. its ability to articulate and construct a common sense – managed to create equivalential chains among seemingly heterogeneous struggles and identities – interpellating a collective ‘we’ (the people) in opposition to an adversary that was perceived as common. In SYRIZA’s discourse, ‘the people’ functioned as an empty

signifier that included vulnerable social groups, minorities and lower social strata, including the working and middle classes, the left as well as pensioners, people with disabilities, single mothers, environmental activists but also migrants and LGBTQ+ communities, highlighting a case of pluralistic and democratic populism (Venizelos 2020). ‘The establishment’, on the other hand, was composed of ‘traditional parties’ and the ‘two party-system’ (constituted by PASOK and New Democracy) that was framed as rotten and the corrupt media sector serving political and economic interests, the banks and the Troika. According to SYRIZA these entities constituted an oligarchic class that acted against the interests of ‘the people’ (Venizelos 2020).

SYRIZA in power (2015–2019) continued to perform in a populist fashion to a great extent: signifiers such as ‘the people’ and ‘popular sovereignty’ maintained their prominence in Tsipras’ discourse. In line with stylistic and socio-cultural approaches to populism (Ostiguy et al. 2021), SYRIZA’s leader and prime minister continued to ‘behave’ as a common man, flaunting the political ‘low’ (Venizelos 2023). For example, Tsipras continued to pursue his ‘no-tie’ policy, lived in a working-class area of Athens and had an ordinary person’s mannerisms (Venizelos 2020). Through discursive and performative repertoires, the leftist government sought to voice the people’s rejection of austerity and restore their dignity lost to the dictates of the Troika (Katsambekis 2019: 35–36). Being a radical party *in government*, SYRIZA’s administration exhibited both protest and technocratic traits. This (productive and unavoidable) tension can be understood in terms of Ostiguy’s (2015) notion of ‘dirty institutionality’: SYRIZA presented itself as both an insider and an outsider, simultaneously in government and in opposition, being the state and being the people at the same time (Venizelos 2023).

However, after a short period of resistance, SYRIZA succumbed to the demands of the European institutions and followed the path of austerity. Nevertheless, despite operating within the restrictive framework of political and economic monitoring, the government tried to implement a socially progressive programme in favour of ‘the unprivileged’, including increasing the minimum wage, passing human rights acts and so on (Katsambekis 2019; Markou 2021a). Without underestimating SYRIZA’s social agenda, the leftist government failed to deliver its core economic promise to cancel austerity, further alienating the electorate (Venizelos and Stavrakakis 2022). Following SYRIZA’s capitulation, the affective dimension of populism – connecting the people with the party – progressively lost its centrality, while the SYRIZA’s bonds with the popular classes began to weaken, resulting in its defeat in the July 2019 elections (Venizelos 2023).

Another prominent case which could be discussed through the lens of populism is that of Donald Trump, which is located on the (extreme) right of the political spectrum. The emergence of Donald Trump as a nominee for the Republican candidacy signified a *break* in American politics (Wagner-Pacifici and Tavory 2019: 30). Not only did it challenge political orthodoxy converging at the political centre of the American party system, but it also challenged the way politics was thought of – and above all *done* – for years. Trump’s performativity resonates well with socio-cultural and stylistic approaches to populism (Ostiguy et al. 2021): his flamboyant behaviour and promiscuous and scandalous style represent an opposition to the conventional political standards (i.e. ‘the high’), placing him on ‘the low’ of the political axis. Similarly, his hyperbolic hand gestures, his unrefined way of speaking – comprising very short, even incomplete, sentences; suffering from poor syntax and an unadorned vocabulary; resembling very little conventional politicians who are typically ‘proper’ and ‘bookish’ (Ostiguy 2017) – alluded to an authentic style of the common people. His transgressive style that provoked the

hegemonic norms of American politics and culture is typical of a populist rupture (Venizelos 2022).

In terms of the discursive construction ‘the people’, Trump framed the collective subject as ‘the forgotten men and women of our country. People who work hard but no longer have a voice’ (Trump 2016). Thus, although he often framed ‘the people’ as ‘great’ or ‘amazing’, nostalgia was an evident element in his narrative. This is reflected in his central campaigning slogan – ‘Make America Great Again!’. In juxtaposition, ‘the enemy’ took different names in Trump’s discourse. He referred to ‘the elites’ as the ‘dishonest political establishment’, as a ‘rigged system’ with ‘special interests’. Hillary Clinton assumed a central position in Trump’s articulation of the establishment, portrayed as ‘corrupt’ and ‘evil’, while ‘Washington’ was repeatedly referred to as a ‘swamp’ (White 2019).

Beyond populist antagonism operating on the vertical, top-down axis, Donald Trump’s narrative operated simultaneously on a horizontal level, revealing in/out exclusions which are typical of nationalism (see De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). Trump attacked the foreign ‘other’, immigrants who are ‘let in by thousands’, ‘especially from SYRIA’. He made explicit references to ‘radical Islamic terrorism’, ‘the Middle East’, ‘Muslims’ and Mexicans whom he framed as ‘criminal aliens’, ‘illegal immigrants’, ‘murderers’ ‘drug lords’ and ‘gang members’. ‘Borders’ assumed a central part in his discourse (Trump 2016). This highlights that Trump was not any type of ‘populist’ – but a populist belonging to the far right of the spectrum. ‘The people’ in his discourse, did not always function as an empty signifier but rather as a signifier that is fixed *a priori*. In Trump’s discourse, ‘the people’ is a synonym of *ethnos* and thus associated with the phantasmatic horizon of nationalism, revolving around a constructed *myth* of the past that can no longer be attained (Venizelos 2023). Using Casullo’s (2020) conceptualization, it is evident that the spatio-temporal orientation of Trump’s discourse – attacking, or punching, the excluded and marginalized – is *downwards*.

Donald Trump’s populism endured in power. This highlights the increasing relevance of Ostiguy’s (2015) notion of dirty institutionality in that it underscores that populist performativity does not necessarily moderate once in government. Despite being in office, the 45th president of the US distinguished himself from ‘the establishment’. He continued to attack the Democrats as well as ‘mainstream media’ as opponents of ‘the people’. His abrasive style, hostile rhetoric and constant attacks on the press and judiciary are unique in the history of the American presidency (White 2019).

DEMOCRACY, POLICIES AND IDENTIFICATION

The survey of various populists globally highlights the multi-faceted and highly diversified nature of the phenomenon under study. This third section juxtaposes the theoretical frameworks reviewed in the first section of the chapter with the various populist profiles reviewed in the second section.

As highlighted in the theoretical section of this chapter, dominant approaches expect populism to negatively impact democracy. However, the relationship between populism and democracy seems not to be as straight forward – it is, at best, ambivalent (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). For example, it seems rather problematic to argue that a case of populism in power such as that of SYRIZA posed a major illiberal threat to the institutions. Indeed, the SYRIZA government launched severe attacks against media moguls which were repeatedly

framed as corrupt. This resonates, in a way, with Müller's (2016) conviction that populists foreclose freedom of speech and attack the media. But before arriving at any generic conclusion about populists in power and the media, one must not disregard certain contextual factors embedded in the Greek case – such as the absence of effective regulation of the media sector in terms of television licenses and taxation. Additionally, SYRIZA's war on the media had a strictly institutional and procedural character. Importantly, when the courts eventually ruled out the procedure as unconstitutional, effectively cancelling it, SYRIZA did not protest this decision. Nor did it ignore constitutional mandates.

Kirchnerism in Argentina also challenges the association of populism with illiberalism. Despite the obstacles and challenges, such as economic inflation, political stagnation and allegations of corruption, that Kirchnerism has encountered over the years (Manzetti 2014; Stefanoni 2019), the populist movement sought to form new paths for democratic participation and incorporation of the popular classes. In particular, the Kirchnerist populist platform presented a humanitarian, progressive and neodevelopmental direction, putting special emphasis on vulnerable social groups, improving the economic conditions of the lower classes through social security programmes, favouring higher wages and better working conditions, facilitating lower unemployment rates and enhancing human rights. Moreover, it did not challenge democratic institutions and attempted to strengthen justice, sought to achieve consensus on polarizing issues (e.g. conflict with the agricultural sector over tax increases) and promoted progressive policies for the LGBTQ community.

Trump, on the contrary, posed a systemic stress test for American democracy. His attacks on the courts, and many federal agencies, overwhelmed the checks and balances. His allegations for electoral fraud spread mistrust towards elections, undermining democratic legitimacy and increasing socio-political polarization in the US (Venizelos 2022). Trump sought to increase his hegemony by installing loyal conservatives in key positions, thereby politicizing bureaucracy.

A second dominant argument, as outlined in the first section, maintains that populists fail to implement policies. Such an argument seems to be connected with discourses that link populism with irresponsibility and demagoguery. Arguably, populists' success or failure depends on a variety of factors that are *exogenous* to populism. For example, Donald Trump met resistance from various branches of the federal government, the House of Representatives, the Senate as well as his own party, which blocked several of his proposals. As such, Donald Trump failed to implement key electoral promises such as to 'build the wall' on the border between the US and Mexico. Similarly, the restrictive framework within which the SYRIZA government in Greece attempted to negotiate a better economic deal with European and international creditors left little space for manoeuvre and Tsipras yielded to the will of external pressure.

However, this is not to say that populist governments are incapable of passing policy or leaving behind a legacy rooted in their ideological core. For example, despite being rated as one of the most ineffective presidents in the history of the US, Donald Trump managed to leave his ideological footprint: for example, in his four years in office, Trump appointed more than 200 judges to the federal bench (more than Obama appointed in eight years), including so-called 'pro-life' judges, flipping the balance of the judiciary towards the right and influencing decision making on issues that were highly politicized (such as abortion) (Gramlich 2021).

In the case of SYRIZA, notwithstanding its retreat from its anti-neoliberal commitment, the left government sought to safeguard and modestly expand social rights by passing policy measures that offered free health care to 2 million uninsured citizens, free meals to school

children and a minimum solidarity income for the poor, curtailed family home repossessions and oversaw a restructuring of non-serviced loans (Katsambekis 2019; Tambakaki 2019). In Argentina, the strong dispute with the IMF, economic instability and inflation, as well as the constant battle with domestic anti-populism emanating from mainstream media and politicians, created serious obstacles for the ‘Kirchnerist model’ in government. Despite this, the Peronist left-wing platform managed to pay back all of the country’s outstanding loans to the IMF and restructured debt. It also implemented significant changes in the media sector and improved the lives of the social majority, simultaneously protecting human rights (Levy 2017).

A core issue that seems to be overlooked in the analysis and evaluation of populists in government is salience – or their ability to maintain affective hegemonies and continue to mobilize their supporters while in power. ‘The people’ is not a mere rhetorical reference but a collective identity that rests on deep affective bonds among its members (horizontally) and between its members and leaders/party/ideology (vertically) (Venizelos 2023).

In the case of Greece, identification took a downward trajectory. Political enthusiasm was replaced by alienation and disillusionment which ultimately led to SYRIZA’s electoral defeat in 2019 (Venizelos and Stavrakakis 2022). However, this was not the case with Donald Trump. His term in office was described as catastrophic (Glassen 2021): he failed to pass a significant number of executive actions (especially in the first year in office); his response to the COVID-19 outbreak and his unwillingness to employ the necessary measures to contain the virus arguably could have cost the lives of nearly half a million Americans; and he was said to have encouraged the spread of misinformation and as well as endorsing conspiracy theories (Yamey and Gonsavles 2020). Despite this, Trump managed to gradually gain the approval of the previously hostile Republican Party. Towards the end of his administration, ecstatic grassroots supporters stormed the Capitol to protest alleged electoral fraud against their president. Despite his defeat in 2020, Trump increased his popular vote by 10 million votes compared to 2016 – that is more than any sitting president in the US. This ‘paradox’ further supports the argument that political identification does not rest on reason and facts, nor on the success or effectiveness of governance, but rather on deeper affective energies that generate salient bonds between subjects (Venizelos 2022, 2023).

In Argentina, the (temporary) defeat of Kirchnerist-Peronism in 2015 by Mauricio Macri, after 12 years in power, can be (partially) explained by the exhaustion of the affective reservoir sustaining Peronism’s salience (Biglieri 2020). Accusations of corruption scandals played a pivotal role in the downward trajectory of political identification with Kirchnerist Peronism in Argentina – and this was manifested in the number of anti-government protests. For this reason, Kirchnerist-Peronism required ‘rebranding’ before returning back to power in 2019 after a short anti-populist neoliberal interval (Biglieri 2020). The politics of the passions can then explain the salience and durability of political projects in government and the activation and reactivation of political identifications. The loss of political enthusiasm – evident in the cases of SYRIZA and contemporary Peronism – plays a pivotal role in the trajectory of a populist project. Beyond a persistent supply of populist frames, successful, *and hegemonic*, populist projects require deeper, libidinal operations (Venizelos 2021).

Overall, the three main cases surveyed in this chapter underscore that populism (either in opposition or in power) is a profoundly multi-faceted phenomenon that develops a complex relationship with democracy and affects institutions in distinct ways. Accounts portraying populism as fundamentally monist and homogenizing, and ultimately a threat to (liberal) democracy, may not be addressing the full story. Some populist governments may fall short

of their promises while others may be able to successfully implement policy; some populists may have positive and others a negative effect on democracy. The type of affects they generate – ranging from democratic (hope, solidarity) to anti-democratic (hatred) (Stavrakakis 2007) – have a distinct impact on citizen participation.

At any rate, it is important to note that the populist dimension attached to any political actor ‘does not suffice to explain the type of politics adopted at any given conjuncture. Populist parties or politicians are never merely “populist”; their ideological component should always be taken into account’ (Galanopoulos and Venizelos 2022: 261–262). Additionally, external factors – including institutional constraints and historical conjunctures – may influence the politics of populism once in power (something that applies to non-populists who may also face democratic resistance or fall short of their promises).

CONCLUSION

This chapter provided a theoretical and empirical overview of populism in opposition and in power, with the aim of clarifying certain stereotypical readings. The first section presented the dominant approaches to populism in opposition and in power, highlighting theoretical perspectives on its transition from an oppositional to a governmental actor. The second section provided an overview of (both left- and right-wing) populist phenomena in opposition and power around the world, analysing their main discursive and performative features, their governmental record and transformations in power. The third section of the chapter shed light on the distinct relationship that different populist cases develop with democracy, their impact on the representative institutions and their capabilities to govern in power, underlying that populism is a profoundly many-sided phenomenon that maintains a complex relationship with democracy and has distinct effects on institutions in each case.

Indeed, populists fare differently once in power. Like all other non-populist or anti-populist actors, populists may (or may not) survive the experience of being in office. Like any other non-populist or anti-populist actor, they may fall short of their electoral promises or may be able to pass and implement policy. Yet, such an outcome may not be intrinsic to them being populist. Contextual factors, political developments and historical conjunctures – such as the ability to form coalitions, the existence of strong opposition, external pressure, fiscal and political monitoring by supranational mechanisms, etc. – may affect the way populists perform, in opposition or in government.

Importantly, populism in government does not always constitute a threat to democracy. Distinct typologies of populism – ranging from left to right, inclusionary or exclusionary, progressive or reactionary, bottom up or top down – are likely to explain the distinct impact on democracy, the institutions of representation and society. A critical factor that affects this is the ideology that accompanies populism.

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31. Populist democracy or populist dictatorship?

Paul Lucardie

INTRODUCTION

If translated into plain English, ‘populist democracy’ would mean ‘people’s power of the people’, a typical pleonasm. A few scholars argue along these lines, like Ernesto Laclau (2005: 176, 191) and to some extent also Margaret Canovan (2002) and Yannis Papadopoulos (2002: 58). However, other authors consider combining the two words an oxymoron (Abt and Rummens 2007; Pasquino 2008). More often, populist democracy is seen as a distinct type of democracy, an alternative to ‘Madisonian’, liberal or pluralist democracy (Dahl 1956; Hawkins et al. 2012; Mouffe 2019; Pappas 2014). Attempting a synthesis of these conceptualizations, I will treat populist democracy here as one of four paradigms of democracy.¹ Each paradigm represents a distinct way of thinking and doing politics, embedded in a worldview or mindset. Political theorists may develop a sophisticated version in their scholarly work, sometimes borrowing elements from different paradigms, while politicians usually articulate a more straightforward version in their speeches and citizens express their view more implicitly in day-to-day conversation or in their response to survey questions.

The relevant mindset has influence on the political system or regime, but the relationship is complicated. A regime is the product of political compromises and social struggles, economic constraints, constitutional procedures and other factors. In fact, few – if any – regimes can be considered pure democracies, as I have argued elsewhere: practically all are ‘mixed regimes’ or ‘mixed constitutions’ combining democratic, aristocratic and autocratic institutions and practices (Lucardie 2014; see also Hansen 2010; Sozen 2019). The mixture may not be stable, as new social and political movements tend to strengthen either the democratic or the autocratic and aristocratic elements of the regime, possibly stimulated by an economic crisis, foreign intervention or other external events. If pressures mount, all types of democracy risk degenerating into authoritarianism or even dictatorship.

This chapter provides first an analysis of populist democracy as one of four democratic paradigms. The strengths and weaknesses of populist democracy are discussed in the second section. The third section deals with the question if or to what extent populist parties in government try to realize populist democracy, while the fourth section contains brief comments on the impact of populist opposition parties with regards to democracy. The chapter ends with some rather paradoxical conclusions.

THE PARADIGM OF POPULIST DEMOCRACY

Democracy can be defined in a myriad of ways, but the original meaning is simple: people’s power. Nobody can reasonably deny that. Views begin to diverge, however, as to the way and the extent to which power should be exercised by the people. Views differ also about the meaning of ‘people’, as will become clear below.

Elitist democrats want to restrict the power of the people to a minimum: electing decision makers and ‘throwing out the rascals’ from time to time. Pluralists allow the people indirect influence on policies and encourage their participation in civil society. Populists as well as participatory democrats claim generally absolute power for the people but disagree about the homogeneity of the people: a given fact or the contingent product of a process of deliberation; and they disagree about the extent to which people should exercise their power: incidentally or permanently (see Lucardie 2014).

The four paradigms imply different notions of politics, one could argue. Elitists define politics usually as a craft or profession, requiring special talent and training; democratic elitism might slide easily into technocratic elitism (see Caramani 2017; Goldhammer 2011: 154–156). In the eyes of the pluralist, politics may be the art of negotiation, rather than a technical craft. Populists mobilize ‘the people’ against established parties and prefer majority decisions to compromise, often regarding politics as a moral mission. As the ideologue of a right-wing populist party in the Netherlands put it: ‘we are not only politicians, we are also to some extent missionaries’ (Bosma 2011: 226). Participatory democrats consider politics ‘a way of living’: citizens should not only vote in intermittent elections and referendums but also frequently ‘talk politics’ and take part in agenda-setting as well as decision making in a ‘never-ending process of deliberation’ in daily life, at the workplace and the neighbourhood, citizen juries and political parties (Barber 1990 [1984]: 117–138, 151–152; see also Canovan 1999: 14–16). Participatory democrats are often also deliberative democrats. Benjamin Barber considered majoritarianism ‘a tribute to the failure of democracy’ and argued that citizens could (and should) transform conflicting private interests through deliberation into a common public interest (1990 [1984]: 198).

Elitist democracy has been defended by the Austrian-born political economist Joseph Schumpeter (1976 [1942]) and more recently by his American colleague William Riker (1982). Pluralist democracy has been articulated by many political scientists; the most well known might be Robert Dahl (1956). A more radical advocate is the theorist William Connolly, who emphasizes that a polity should recognize and respect differences without antagonizing identities (2008: 174–206). Unlike the other paradigms, populist democracy has rarely been advocated by political theorists, the main exception probably being Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and scholars inspired by them (e.g. Eklundh and Knott 2020). The Swedish philosopher Torbjörn Tännsjö (1992) has published a ‘defence of populist democracy’, but actually his utopia seems an example of participatory democracy and has little in common with populism as defined in the literature.

Even Mouffe does not fit in completely – at least according to the criteria used in this chapter – as she tries to reconcile (left) populism with pluralism (Mouffe 2019: 10–11). However, she rejects the liberal pluralist view of a neutral state reconciling interests, arguing that the state is a ‘terrain of struggle’ between different political ‘projects’. Other populists go further and try to ‘reclaim the state’ under popular control (Corduener 2014: 428–429). Mouffe’s populist project aims at creating a new ‘hegemonic bloc’ of different groups and movements like workers, immigrants and LHBTI+ groups by articulating a ‘chain of equivalent demands’ in a progressive, democratic direction, against the elitist project of the hegemonic neoliberals (Mouffe 2019: 24, 63). This construction of a popular will through political struggle requires the designation of an adversary. The theory Mouffe developed with Laclau has been applied in practice by political parties like Sinn Féin in Ireland and Podemos in Spain (Iglesias 2015;

Mouffe 2019: 20–21; Ó Broin 2013). Mouffe has also praised the Greek party SYRIZA for practising a similar strategy (2019: 20).

In somewhat different terms, a right-wing populist like the Canadian Preston Manning tried also to reconcile populism with pluralism. The founder of the Reform Party of Canada advocated a ‘democratic populism’ inspired by ‘the common sense of the common people’ (Manning 1992: 6, 25). The Reform Party was to reconcile conflicting interests – regionalists, taxpayers, businessmen, farmers – in its project to give more power to the people through a citizens’ initiative, referendum and recall of elected representatives (Manning 1992: 26, 324–325). Unlike liberal pluralists, however, Manning clearly favoured majority rule and worried about ‘tyrannical minorities’ and ‘special interest groups’, in particular ‘linguistic and cultural minorities’ (Manning 1992: 320). Manning linked populism to conservatism. When the Reform Party failed to win a majority in the Canadian House of Commons, it decided to merge with the Conservatives. The new Conservative Party did enter government office in 2006, but quietly dropped the populist agenda, while Manning had already retired from politics in 2000 (Laycock 2012).

Although both Mouffe and Manning are self-confessed populists, they do not quite meet all the criteria of populism as defined by a dominant current in political science: ‘a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’ (Mudde 2007: 23).² Both populists might agree with the latter, but not the former, as they seem to prefer ‘agonism’ to ‘antagonism’ and (moderate) pluralism to homogeneity. Ironically, Mudde’s definition applies more to politicians and parties that do not call themselves ‘populist’, such as the Dutch Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid). Its main ideologue (and political science graduate) Martin Bosma contrasted the ‘goodness and toughness’ of the ‘ordinary people’ in the Netherlands with the arrogance, selfishness and cowardice of the ‘pseudo-elite of counterfeiters’, the ‘cosmopolitan elite’ that controls the main political parties, the universities, the media, the arts, the unions and the judiciary (2011: 222, 319–326). By allowing and stimulating the mass immigration of Muslims, the elite seemed prepared (in his view) to ruin the culture, identity and freedom of the Dutch people.

Although different in many ways, the Party for Freedom and the Reform Party of Canada share with left-wing parties like Podemos and SYRIZA the ideal of a populist democracy: the will of the people should rule supreme, facilitated by popular initiative, referendum and direct election as well as the recall of officials and leaders; and politics should have primacy before economics (Mudde 2007: 150–155; Partij voor de Vrijheid 2021: 31–33; Podemos 2019: 60–61; SYRIZA 2014). For the American People’s Party – probably the first political party that was called ‘populist’ and that accepted the label – direct legislation by the people was ‘almost an obsession’, according to historian John Hicks (1961 [1931]: 408; see also Houwen 2013: 37–43).

Even if populist democracy implies, in my view, some kind of direct democracy, the two concepts are not identical. Direct democracy is broader, it fits in also with participatory democracy under certain conditions, allowing sufficient deliberation. Moreover, some weak forms of direct democracy, like plebiscites, have been advocated and manipulated by fascist leaders.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF POPULIST DEMOCRACY

A serious evaluation of populist democracy encounters two problems. Firstly, both advocates and critics generally devote little attention to its institutional aspects and many critics tend to disqualify the proposals of populists as utopian and idealistic without thorough analysis (e.g. Pasquino 2008: 28–29). Direct democracy seems a separate research area, rarely related to the study of populism. Secondly, when political scientists evaluate populist democracy, they do so very often within a pluralist paradigm (Dean and Maiguashca 2020: 17). They interpret populism as a ‘pathology’, a ‘challenge’ or at best a ‘corrective’ of pluralist democracy (e.g. Akkerman 2003; Decker 2006; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). Their critical comments do not lose all relevance, however, when we try to evaluate populist democracy ‘from an internal perspective’ (Corduwener 2014), i.e. within its own paradigm, as both the populist and pluralist paradigms share basic values like equal rights and opportunities for political participation.

In principle, populist democracy should create more generous opportunities for political participation than pluralist democracy, through the popular initiative, referendum, recall and direct election of officials (Mudde 2007: 150–155; Papadopoulos 2002; Sural 2004: 106–107). Moreover, populists will try to mobilize all sections of the people, including the unorganized workers, the unemployed, housewives, old age pensioners and other groups that may be neglected by pluralists. As a consequence, they score higher on inclusiveness than the latter (Rovira Kaltwasser 2012: 197–199). Ideally, populist institutions and mobilization strategies will prevent oligarchization and ‘post-democratic’ technocracy, as Mouffe has argued (2019: 39–57). Sensitive issues that might be swept under the carpet by a technocratic and oligarchic government will be politicized by the people through a popular initiative (Van Reybrouck 2008: 60–61). Technocratic or authoritarian officials will be recalled by the people. Citizens develop more knowledge and interest in politics as a result of their experience with direct democracy, as comparative research in Switzerland has shown (Kriesi 2012).

However, not all is well in a populist democracy. As many critics have pointed out, popular initiatives and referenda reduce complex reality to simple binary choices (yes/no), possibly resulting in erratic, incoherent policies. Moreover, they cannot reflect the intensity and multi-dimensionality of people’s preferences; direct democracy might reveal ‘what the most people want, but we do not learn what the people want most’ (Clark 1998: 482). If there are more than two alternatives and none of them finds favour in the eyes of a majority, a very unstable situation of cyclical majorities might occur (Riker 1982: 1–2, 65–136).

Riker seems a little extreme in his conclusion that ‘we never know what the people want’ (1982: 238) and that therefore elites should not even consult the people. However, even scholars who reject his elitism worry about manipulation of referenda by elites or pressure groups (e.g. Cronin 1989: 196–222; Papadopoulos 1995: 433–436). Populists often fear manipulation by elitist media, artists, academics and other intellectuals (see the above-quoted Bosma 2011: 319–326). Hence, they might try to curb the influence and independence of media and universities once they have acquired the power to do so (Ruth-Lovell et al. 2019: 18–20). Moreover, majority decisions like referenda or popular initiatives might polarize the population and harm the rights of minorities, as pluralists are quick to point out. Direct election and recall of officials might have a similar effect (see Cronin 1989: 125–156). Populist governments tend to discourage competition from opposition parties and democratic alternation, and try

to monopolize the political agenda, according to several experts (Akkerman 2003: 154–158; Decker 2006: 24–28; Rovira Kaltwasser 2012: 197; Surel 2004: 107–108).

Arguably, these tendencies follow more or less logically from the conception of a homogeneous and virtuous people opposed by vicious elites and their allies as advocated by many (though not all) populists. A homogeneous people can be represented by a single party, or even a single leader who understands and incarnates the popular will. As a consequence, all other parties must (logically) represent not the people but elites or alien minorities. And even if the elites have lost elections they often remain entrenched in the civil service, the judiciary, the secret service or ‘deep state’, if not in powerful corporations and banks. They might try to mobilize immigrants or other minorities against the populists in government. They might also receive funds and advice from foreign agents. Using these undemocratic means against the people, the elitist opposition might even claim victory in the following elections. No wonder populist leaders are tempted to take full control over the state apparatus, including the judiciary as well as the media, and to reduce the freedom of opposition forces, perhaps even to manipulate and rig elections themselves. Thus, populist democracy might slide almost inevitably into populist dictatorship. This critical argument has been developed eloquently by Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens (2007) and Jan-Werner Müller (2016).

The logic of the argument seems impeccable, but its empirical validity has not been firmly established so far. Abts and Rummens do not provide any empirical data, while Müller gives rather selective examples of authoritarian leaders like Hugo Chavez, Viktor Orbán and Vladimir Putin, who combine ‘strong’, anti-pluralist populism with nationalism. The archetype of populism, the American People’s Party, does not meet Müller’s criteria because it tried to combine pluralism and populism (2016: 39–42). In his eyes, Mouffe’s pluralist left populism is a contradiction in terms: her project will either result in a revival of (pluralist) social democracy or in nationalist and (in the end) authoritarian populism (2016: 117–123). Thus formulated, his prediction seems impossible to falsify. As will be argued in the next section, *pace* both Mouffe and Müller, some political systems do qualify as a mixture of pluralist and populist democracy.

POPULIST GOVERNMENT DOES NOT EQUAL POPULIST DEMOCRACY

One might expect that a populist democracy would be established by a populist government, i.e. a government dominated by one or more populist parties. However, empirical reality seems more complicated, as comparative research in this area – still in its infancy – suggests. Most populist parties in government have failed to introduce direct democracy, even if they promised to do so in their programmes (Jacobs 2011; Ruth-Lovell et al. 2019). In fact, in the long run they may tend to reduce and erode most aspects of democracy, including majoritarian or populist institutions. On the other side of the coin, essential elements of populist democracy can be found in political systems not dominated by populists.

A few examples might illustrate this. Both Switzerland and California come very close to direct democracy as proposed by populists. According to the American lawyer (and politician) Kris Kobach, Switzerland is the only country in the world ‘where political life truly revolves around the referendum’ (1994: 98). In 1848 the Swiss introduced the obligatory constitutional referendum, in 1874 the optional legislative referendum and in 1891 the popular initiative

(Kriesi 1995: 81–84; see also Bundesverfassung der Schweizerischen Eidgenossenschaft 2021 [1999]; Curti 1882). During the twentieth century, Swiss citizens could vote more than 400 times on constitutional amendments, treaties or laws – probably more than the citizens of all other countries put together (Butler and Ranney 1994: 5). Although in most cases they approved or failed to reject the proposals drafted by the parliamentarians and party leaders, the latter tend to anticipate the objections of the voters, negotiate with pressure groups and try to build a consensus before passing potentially controversial laws (Kriesi 1995: 88–89; 2012: 42).

The pursuit of consensus and compromise chimes in more with pluralist than with populist democracy. So does the absence of recall and the indirect election of government leaders and judges – by parliament rather than the people, at least in most cantons.³ The Swiss system is consociational and very respectful of linguistic and religious minorities. This might have created a political opportunity for the rise of a national populist party in the late twentieth century, the Swiss People's Party (Schweizerische Volkspartei, SVP) (Albertazzi 2008: 107–111). The SVP resulted from a merger of two centrist farmers' parties in 1971 and gradually expanded its electorate while adopting a populist style and nationalist position against immigration and cooperation with the European Union (Albertazzi 2008; Mazzoleni 2013: 194–198). In its political programme it strongly defends the Swiss constitution against the 'supposed political elites' (*vermeintliche politische Eliten*) who want to abolish direct democracy and ignore the 'will of the people' in the name of international law (Schweizerische Volkspartei 2019: 3; see also Mazzoleni 2013: 196). Although the SVP has been the largest party in parliament since 2003 with about a quarter of the seats, it is often outvoted by the more pro-European and less nationalist mainstream parties which are controlled by the supposed 'political elites', in its opinion. Like all major parties in the Swiss parliament, the SVP has the right to appoint ministers to the federal government, yet at the same time it wages opposition in parliament and has often organized popular initiatives or referenda to correct or cancel government policies (Mazzoleni 2013: 198–203). So far, it seems the party has accepted the pluralist elements of the Swiss constitution, even if it has tried to reduce the freedom of the Muslim minority in particular – arguably more as a consequence of its ethnic and cultural nationalism than its populism (Albertazzi 2008: 113). At the same time, other national populist parties like the Dutch Party for Freedom often refer to the Swiss system as a shining example (e.g. Wilders 2016).

California's political system should appeal even more to populists, even if it may not be mentioned in party publications very often. The people of the Golden State can elect and recall the governor and other state officials, elect legislators and judges, select candidates for Congress and the presidency in primaries, propose initiatives and vote on statutes passed by the legislature (Government of California n.d.: article II). According to the Californian political scientist Jack Citrin, 'all major policy decisions in California have been settled by a popular vote or a threat of such a vote' since 1978 (2009: 7). In 1978, a taxpayers' association initiated a proposition to prevent the state government from raising property taxes which won the approval of 65 per cent of the voters, against an alliance of the Democratic and Republican parties, the trade unions and big corporations. Since then, power has shifted from elected politicians to 'the people' – or to lobbyists and campaign consultants who succeed in manipulating the popular vote, in a more cynical view (Citrin 2009: 8; see also Bowler and Donovan 2000). Yet 'special interests' seem to have limited influence. Minority interests and rights have been harmed by some popular votes, but in the long run discriminating measures have usually been

abolished (Egelko 2020). California has retained a two-party system; the populist movement of 1978 did not evolve into a political party. Its electoral and political system is more majoritarian than the Swiss, but separation of powers and a strong civic culture will probably prevent the erosion of pluralism.

On paper, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela would also qualify as a populist democracy. The constitution drafted by a Constitutional Assembly and approved by a majority of the electorate in 1999 promised the people the right to elect and recall officials, to approve or reject statutes and presidential decrees in a referendum and to vote on popular initiatives (Gobierno Bolivariano de Venezuela 2006 [1999]: 31–34). At the same time, the constitution granted extended powers to the president (2006 [1999]: 96–98). Academic observers disagree about the way and the extent to which populist democracy had been realized during the presidency of Hugo Chávez (1998–2013), but seem to agree that the regime of his successor Nicolás Maduro has to be qualified as a dictatorship (Buxton 2018; Fuentes and González Plessmann 2021; Hawkins 2010; Motta 2011; Stavrakakis et al. 2016). According to Marta Valiñas, Chairperson of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the parliamentary elections of 2020 were ‘neither free nor fair’, human rights were violated at a large scale and political opposition was repressed by arbitrary detentions and extrajudicial executions (Valiñas 2021).

The Latin American expert Carlos de la Torre perceives similar trends towards ‘competitive authoritarianism’ in other countries governed by left populist movements like Ecuador and Bolivia, though in the latter bottom-up social movements have resisted the trend to some extent and successfully defended pluralism, sometimes even against anti-populist and anti-democratic elitists (De la Torre 2016; see also Eaton 2014).

In fact, not all populist parties in government try to introduce a populist democracy. Events in Greece and Hungary seem to demonstrate this. In the eyes of Takis Pappas, both countries are ‘populist democracies’ because they are dominated by polarizing populist parties in government and in opposition, led by charismatic leaders and feeding ‘cronyism, corruption and inefficiency’, overpromising and overspending (2014). Although illiberal, they are also pluralistic systems (Pappas 2014: 18). Direct democracy is not mentioned in his definition of populist democracy. What Pappas regards as populist democracy should be considered in the terminology of this chapter a corrupt combination of pluralism (in the party system), populism (in rhetoric and attempts to control the state apparatus) and perhaps elitism (given the convergence between the major parties at least at the beginning of the twenty-first century). His relevant work was completed in 2013, when the Greek party system seemed about to collapse during the financial and economic crisis and growing street protests against the austerity policies of the two major parties, PASOK and New Democracy (Katsambekis 2019: 23–25). In the elections of January 2015 both parties suffered drastic losses whereas the left populist SYRIZA won almost half of the seats in parliament and managed to lead a government with the participation of a small national-populist party, Independent Greeks. The coalition lasted until 2019, when New Democracy regained a majority in parliament. The populist coalition carried out modest reforms of citizenship law and gender equality – some of them opposed by Independent Greeks but supported by liberal or centre-left opposition parties. While retaining a populist discourse, SYRIZA seemed to pursue a social-democratic agenda and strengthen pluralism rather than usher in a direct populist democracy (Katsambekis 2019: 38–39). Perhaps Pappas was too pessimistic about his native country when he expressed fear that pluralism would give way to populist clientelism.

Pappas's fear seems more justified in the case of Hungary. Since 2010 the country has been governed by the Civic Alliance (Fidesz) that initially advocated liberalism but has morphed into a conservative, nationalist, authoritarian and populist party. Orbán, its charismatic leader, called for an 'illiberal democracy' based on Christian values, a 'workfare state' protecting families and public wealth against foreign interests and against 'paid political activists' (Orbán 2014). The state should be organized by 'elected and professional statesmen and lawmakers'. When Fidesz obtained an absolute majority in parliament it revised the constitution or Fundamental Law in this direction. The Fundamental Law has to be approved by Parliament, not by the people (Hungarian Government 2017). Parliament is elected by the people, of course, and the people can veto a limited category of laws in a national referendum, provided turnout is more than 50 per cent (Hungarian Government 2017). According to the Hungarian constitutional lawyer Gábor Halmai, the Fidesz regime is not a direct democracy and not even an illiberal democracy but an authoritarian regime using 'false populism' as rhetoric (2019). A somewhat similar conclusion is reached by the Hungarian political scientist Attila Antal, who analysed in depth the ideological background of Orbán and his staff (2019). Their central ideas about a 'constitutional dictatorship' and 'leader democracy' were inspired by the German theorist Carl Schmitt and by Schumpeter, respectively, aiming at an autocratic state and a neoliberal market economy (Antal 2019: 75–93). As elections are still competitive – even if gerrymandering of electoral districts reduces the chances of the opposition parties – Hungary seems closer to democratic elitism than to dictatorship in the terminology used here, but far from a populist or pluralist democracy (for a more nuanced view see Palonen 2018).

POPULISTS IN OPPOSITION

Whereas most scholars are critical about populist parties in power, they tend to be much milder about populists in opposition. Populist opposition parties often give a voice to groups that do not feel represented by established parties, such as unorganized workers, the unemployed, housewives or old age pensioners (Decker 2006: 22, 24–28). Moreover, they broaden the political agenda and politicize issues swept under the carpet by technocratic or elitist governments, thus strengthening the competitiveness of the system (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012: 206–211). Populists might help to restore the balance between the excessive power of minorities ('radical pluralism' in the words of Marc Plattner (2010)) and majoritarianism in a liberal democratic system. Furthermore, by channelling discontent within the party system, they might prevent extremists from gaining power and help to legitimize the system (Surel 2004: 103). However, the impact of populist opposition parties should not be overestimated, as Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser conclude from four case studies (2012: 209). Obviously, more systematic comparative research is needed here.

CONCLUSIONS

Some tentative and paradoxical conclusions can be drawn from this critical survey of the literature. In the first place, populist parties in power usually fail to implement the essential elements of stable populist democracy, i.e. frequent referenda, popular initiatives, direct elections and recall of officials (see Greece and Hungary). And, if they try to do so, they often fail to

prevent the perversion of these elements, leading to a populist dictatorship (as in Venezuela). Ironically, populist democracy seems to do better in polities without dominant populist parties, as in California and Switzerland. This is the second paradox. The third paradox is also illustrated by the Swiss case but perhaps also by Greece: a strong populist opposition party can strengthen the democratic pluralist quality of a system, by politicizing new issues and mobilizing support for alternative policies. In fact, when SYRIZA entered government, it also strengthened pluralism by expanding minority rights.

The paradoxes might be resolved to some extent by taking into account the institutional and historical context as well as the ‘host ideology’ of populist parties. Parties inspired by ethnic nationalism or authoritarian socialism will be inclined to reduce pluralism, whereas social democratic or liberal populists tend to protect it. Yet, even ethnic nationalists might respect pluralism if that has been institutionalized and firmly embedded in the political and civic culture of a country; in that case pluralism has become part of the national identity they want to protect. Counterexamples are Argentina and Turkey, where an elitist ‘façade democracy’ with formal but weak democratic institutions preceded the installation of an authoritarian populist regime, as discussed by Yunus Sozen (2019: 279–280).

To end with an understatement: the relationship between populism and democracy may be considered ambiguous and ambivalent.

NOTES

1. In Lucardie (2014), I distinguished elitist, pluralist and radical paradigms of democracy but did not clearly treat populist and participatory radical democracy as different paradigms. The four paradigms resemble some of the seven ideal types of democracy constructed by the Varieties of Democracy project led by Michael Coppedge and John Gerring (Coppedge et al. 2020: 27–42); their notion of majoritarian democracy comes close to populist democracy, in my view. However, the project aims at the operationalization and measurement of the ideal types but not at constructing a hierarchy in which populist democracy can be fitted. Moreover, ‘ideal types’ are according to Max Weber value-free constructions, whereas ‘paradigms’ are inevitably value-laden.
2. The ‘ideational approach’ of Mudde and his colleagues has been criticized by scholars like Giorgos Katsambekis (2022), Yannis Stavrakakis and Anton Jäger (2018) and Pierre Ostiguy et al. (2020). The critics generally see populism as a discourse, a strategy or a performative style of politics rather than as an ideology and point out that populists do not always regard the people as ‘pure’ or ‘homogeneous’. However, all seem to agree that populists focus on the antagonism between people and the elite while they argue that the people should dominate (Ostiguy et al. 2020: 2).
3. In a few cantons, e.g. Appenzell-Innerrhoden, cantonal judges as well as the members of the government are elected directly by the people in a popular assembly (*Landsgemeinde*), according to article 20 of the cantonal constitution (*Verfassung für den Eidgenössischen Stand Appenzell I. Rh.*).

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32. National and transnational

Panos Panayotu

INTRODUCTION

Much ink has been spilled on the different types of populism: left wing and right wing, inclusionary and exclusionary, progressive and regressive, upward punching and downward punching, egalitarian and authoritarian. However, less attention has been paid to another pair of oppositely charged poles: national and transnational populism. In fact, transnational populism is often perceived as a paradox, especially by those who conceive of the national(ist) dimension as an inherent part of all populisms and thus argue that there can only be ‘national populism’ (e.g. Heiskanen 2021; Pantazopoulos 2016; Taguieff 1995) or even that populism is a ‘kind of nationalism’ (Stewart 1969: 183). Indeed, mainstream political science often sees populism as favouring ‘mono-culturalism over multi-culturalism, national self-interest over international cooperation and development aid, closed borders over the free flow of peoples, ideas, labor and capital, and traditionalism over progressive and liberal social values’ (Inglehart and Norris 2016: 7).

From a different perspective, Pierre Ostiguy and his socio-cultural approach seems to share this view. Ostiguy defines populism as ‘the flaunting of the “low”’ (2017: 73), where the ‘low’ is identified with ‘the *more* “native” or “from here”’ (2017: 80, emphasis added). No wonder, then, for many commentators anything that goes beyond the nation-state is considered to be an antithesis to populism. As a result, the idea of transnational populism, both theoretically and empirically, is far from obvious at first sight.

The aim of this chapter is to explore the specificity of transnational populism by distinguishing it from populism on the national level as well as other possible forms of the phenomenon beyond the nation-state; namely *international* and *post-national* populism. The initial step in conceptualizing transnational populism is to disentangle populism from nationalism and the national arena in broader terms. This will be the focus of the first section of the chapter. The second section zooms in on the differences between the trans-, inter- and post- prefixes that will help in getting a fuller picture of transnational populism in particular, while offering a useful typology for understanding populism beyond and/or above the national context. The third section examines and further problematizes a set of cases that have been classified as examples of transnational populism.

POPULISM AND THE NATION-STATE

The identification of populism with nationalism may appear valid at first glance. This is due to the assertion that ‘the people’ is always, *ipso facto*, a national people and that populism always coincides with some form of nationalism. While it might be true that there is a national imaginary which frames most of the case studies that have been traditionally known as populist, this should not lead to reductionist conclusions.

There seems to be a consensus between the ideational and discursive approaches that nationalism is not a definitional characteristic of populism (see e.g. De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013: 507). From an ideational point of view, populism is understood as a ‘thin-centred ideology’ (Mudde 2004) that can be attached to ‘thick’ *host* ideologies, left or right, or even be combined with other thin ideologies such as nationalism and nativism (McDonnell and Werner 2019: 21–22). In principle, then, whether populism will take a nationalist/nativist or an internationalist or transnationalist direction depends on the *host* ideology that it is articulated with. From such a perspective, however, ‘the people’, one of the core notions of populism, is accompanied by a specific set of ideas that pre-exist. This can be regarded as an obstacle in envisaging a transnational type of populism. More precisely, the fixed image of a homogeneous people – that is crucial to the ideational approach – implies that ‘the people’ is a pre-existing entity with characteristics that are much easier to be found within a national(ist) context.

On the contrary, the discursive approach sees populism as an *empty form* (see Palonen 2018) detached from specific contents. Populism here is defined as a political logic characterized by the discursive construction of a popular subjectivity – ‘the people’ – and its antagonistic opposite – the elite. As noted by Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis, the starting point of this framework is that ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ do not constitute pre-existing categories (2017: 305), but rather contingent constructions of a given discourse. This is why Ernesto Laclau stresses that the minimal unit of analysis in this approach is the *demand* instead of any pre-existing groups, thus avoiding the perception of populism as ‘the ideology or the type of mobilisation of an already constituted group’ (Laclau 2005: 72). ‘The people’ is the product of a process of linking together a set of unsatisfied demands expressed by diverse social actors that are united due to their common opposition to an unresponsive elite (see Laclau 2005). It is a process that merges heterogeneous demands and social actors into a single chain of equivalence. By doing so it gives birth to a collective identity, a ‘*we, the people*’ that includes many particularities which are united as long as they share the same opposition against a ‘*they, the elites*’. Put differently, ‘the people’ in this framework becomes the name of the populist chain of equivalence; a name that unites demands and groups without necessarily homogenizing them – contra to the ‘homogeneity thesis’ of the ideational approach (Katsambekis 2022). Crucially, there is nothing that limits the formation of a populist chain of equivalence to the boundaries of the nation-state. The formal aspect of this approach and the detachment from particular site-specific, or ideological, contents or the national dimension itself, are of great importance, as they enable one to observe populist practices engaging at various levels and scales – from local to national and from there to transnational and other levels beyond and across the nation-state.

One could thus argue that the discursive approach allows one to see more clearly that populism is not always and by definition bound to the national level. Neither is ‘the people’ always and by definition a national people. Although in practice the construction of ‘the people’ in populism might indeed take place mostly within a national arena (see Devenney 2020: 88), this is not a necessary pre-condition. This does not mean that the populist construction of ‘the people’ operates in a socio-political vacuum. Since the nation is still considered the main arena within which political representation is primarily enacted, populist actors are bound to speak the language of the nation up to a certain extent. A complete escape from the national horizon is not possible within such a context. This is not what transnational populism is about either. Against the simplifying assumption that transnationalism in general heralds

‘the death of the nation-state *per se*’, it has been argued that there is a duality, a *between-* and *beyond-*the-nation-state moment inherent in the meaning of the term (see Willis et al. 2004: 3). Aiming to explore how this duality is played out in transnational populism while looking deeper into its specific characteristics, in the following section I take a closer look at the forms that populism can take when it spans national boundaries.

FROM THE NATIONAL TO THE INTERNATIONAL, TRANSNATIONAL AND POST-NATIONAL DIMENSIONS OF POPULISM

To be sure, populism is much easier to emerge on the national level because, as Benjamin Moffitt observes, ‘there is a relatively clear framework – both on a procedural level and an ideational level – in national settings for populists to draw upon in order to claim to speak for “the people”’ (Moffitt 2017: 416). Populism on the national level does not necessarily lead to exclusionary and xenophobic articulations of nationalist populism(s). There are different forms of nationalism and ways of defining and constructing the nation itself. We can consider the contrast between the ethnic nation, on the one hand, and the political/civic nation, on the other. In the first occasion, ‘the people’ is considered as *ethnos* or ‘communal identity’. In the second occasion, ‘the people’ is predominantly taken as *demos* or ‘constituent political power’ (Balibar 2004: 157). On this basis, we can distinguish between different types of nationalism that populism can be articulated with: exclusionary and reactionary nationalisms versus inclusionary and progressive ones. The populist construction of ‘the people’ on the national level then might take a more exclusive and anti-foreigner form or a more inclusive and egalitarian one (see March 2011). As for its antagonistic opposite, the elite(s), this can be both national and international/transnational in nature. In any case, populisms on the national level consider the national arena as the primary field of mobilization and appeal.

Now, in order to think about the connection of populism and transnationalism, one has to be precise about the criteria of defining both populism and transnationalism. In the last instance, *not all that is not national is transnational*. There could be an international or even a post-national articulation of populism. While the differences between inter and transnational populism have been explored in the existing literature (see Agustín 2017; Blokker 2019; De Cleen 2017; De Cleen et al. 2020; Moffitt 2017; Panayotu 2017), transnational and post-national populism are often conflated. Paul Blokker, for example, who examines transnational populism from the angle of European constitutionalism, argues that a ‘transnational form [of populism] transcends international collaboration in that it constructs the people in truly transnational terms: As a post-national, marginalised subject’ (Blokker 2019: 345). However, a transnational people is not the same as a post-national one. Moffitt, for his part, is right to point out that ‘the people’ in transnational populism ‘must be spread over a number of different national contexts’ (2017: 410). What needs to be noted is that this spread can take various forms, some closer and others further away from national contexts.

To make that clear I introduce a conceptual framework for identifying three different types of populism across and beyond the nation based on the prefixes inter-, trans- and post-. I will focus on how each type creates its chain of equivalence as well as where each type locates the *battlefield* within which the struggle between ‘the people’ and the elite(s) takes place.

Considering also the degree of integration of the national particularities in the equivalential chain, I describe the differences between these three types of populism (Figure 32.1):

- *International populism* involves a cooperation between different populist actors, parties and/or populist movements. De Cleen is right to note that international populism is ‘a sort of *meta*-populism’ where a chain of equivalence between different populists that take the nation as the main locus of mobilisation is formed’ (2017: 355; see also Agustín 2021: 191). In the words of Moffitt, international populism is about the ‘international ties between populist actors who are concerned with representing firmly nation-based conceptions of “the people”’ (2017: 410). The centre of activity in this form of populism is retained mostly within national arenas, reaffirming nation-states as the key actors in politics. The emphasis is put on defending, above all, national sovereignty, since, in the end, ‘it is the national community that is protected’ against a common adversary (Agustín 2021: 192). National particularities are loosely integrated into an international populist chain of equivalence. This *meta*-populism does not result in a construction of a new people that transcends national boundaries. In this sense, international populism is merely a ‘marriage of convenience’ between different national peoples (De Cleen et al. 2020: 153; see also McDonnell and Werner 2019) marked by a temporary and weak interaction, prioritizing mostly national agendas. This means that despite the predominance of the nation-state, international populists strive to address ‘global issues at the international arena’ (Agustín 2021: 101). This type thus results in a reproduction of national politics without the possibility and the willingness to move beyond this context.
- *Post-national populism* is marked by the construction of a post-national people through an equivalential chain that links deterritorialized demands counterposed with denationalized elites. A process of fading of, or even negating, the national identities of its counterparts and the nation-state itself is initiated (see Appadurai 1996: 169). What Jürgen Habermas terms *constitutional patriotism* might be crucial in generating such an identity grounded on the rationality of citizens who identify with the ‘universalist principles of constitutional democracy’ (1996: 499–500) as well as on a ‘shared historical experience of having happily overcome nationalism’ (1995: 307). Appeals to popular sovereignty over a sovereignty that is linked to a national-territorial authority predominate here. In this context, sovereignist claims can also be made in defence of a post-national (supranational) entity such as a post-Westphalian *federal* state. A new setting with post-national state institutions can be envisaged as moving accountability, legitimacy and the political *modus vivendi* in broader terms, from the national to the post-/supranational dimension. In contrast to the international model, where national members seek to maintain their autonomy and keep representing nationally defined peoples, in the post-national scenario, this autonomy is abrogated. What we have then is an isolation of the *beyond*-the-nation moment.
- *Transnational populism* entails the construction of a popular identity, a ‘we’ that while moving beyond the national borders does not aim to replace national identities but rather to supplement them. A chain of equivalence unites grievances and demands that are shared across nations, producing a transnational people. Such a populist project attempts to move the centre of gravity of the political activity beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, but it distinguishes itself from a post-national populism marked by the tendency to neglect or totally abandon the nation-state. A transnational populist force is not a flexible network of national particularities, but rather a highly integrated one. The transnational space that

is created as a result of cross-border transnational practices is seen as the primary field of activity and it feeds into the national level, which continues to be an important part of the equation.

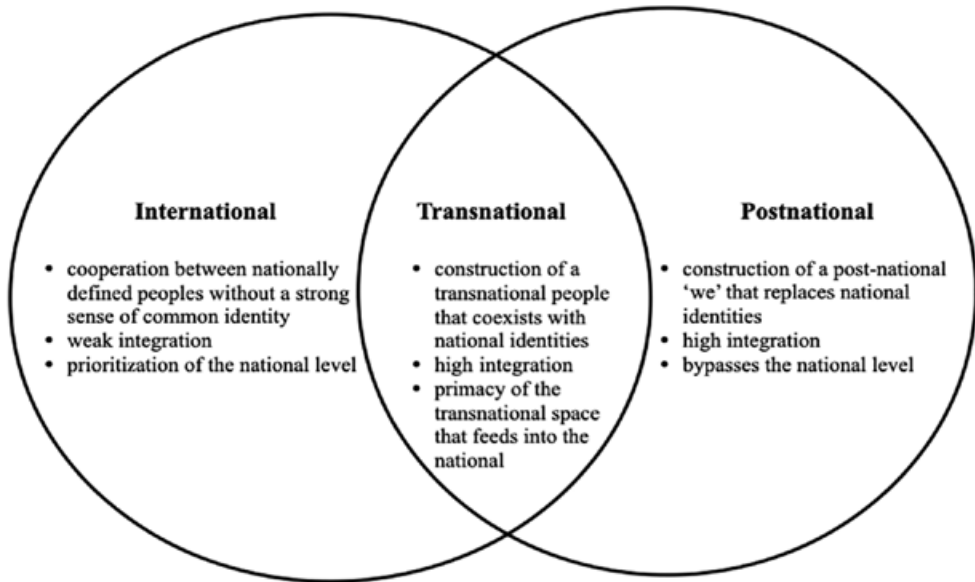


Figure 32.1 The international, transnational and post-national dimensions of populism

Based on the above, transnational populism should not be confused with a post-national project that attempts to ‘construct a homogeneous, postnational “we” through which the diversity of national “we” would be overcome’ (Mouffe 2013: 49). Neither should it be conflated with an international populism which is based on a loose cooperation between national populisms that represent national peoples without investing in a strong sense of a common identity (De Cleen et al. 2020: 153). While both inter and post-national populisms assume a single common identity – national in the first case, post-national in the second – transnational populism entails ‘a people’ that is perceived as a plural subject. It constitutes a third way, a type of politics that aims to escape from the dichotomy between an international project, where the nation remains the main arena, and a post-national one, where the nation-state is absent.

With this in mind, transnational populism can be defined as ‘a dichotomic discourse in which “the transnational people” are juxtaposed to “the elite” along the lines of a down/up antagonism in which “the transnational people” is discursively constructed as a large powerless group through opposition to “the elite” conceived as a small and illegitimately powerful group’ (De Cleen et al. 2020: 153).

What makes populism transnational is the construction of a transnational people. As already mentioned, this transnational identity does not entail a single, post-national identity that would erase national identities. It rather coexists with diverse national identities leading to a plural conception of shared identities (see e.g. Nicolaïdis 2013). The transnational people is conceived as a subject marked by a dual perspective. The identity of such a people becomes

more difficult to determine (Laclau 2005: 98–99). It requires more ‘construction than nationally bounded “peoples”’ (Moffitt 2017: 417). This difficulty is also connected to the absence of genuine transnational political institutions that would represent a transnational people (De Cleen 2017: 357). In the domain of social movements, however, this might not really be the case. Indeed, Paris Aslanidis shows that populism can function as a *master frame* for transnational movements and mobilizations through the connection of common grievances (2018). Nevertheless, the problem will again become evident if and when those mobilizations are to be translated into actual influence in the decision-making process (De Cleen 2017: 357). This is an obstacle that potential transnational populist forces are bound to face: the fact that democratic representation is still first and foremost national and that genuine transnational institutions representing transnational people are yet to emerge.

Although the construction of a transnational people is a defining feature of transnational populism, Moffitt underlines that the opposition to a transnational elite is not by itself a sign of transnational populism (2017: 410). The targeting of transnational elites is very often present in populist phenomena at the national level (De Cleen et al. 2020: 153). Furthermore, the antagonistic other of a transnational populism may include national elites which may be considered to be part of a broader transnational network.

Before moving to the discussion of the empirical cases, it is important to deal more directly with a methodological and analytical issue. For example, how can one detect the *dual* character of the transnational people when conducting empirical analysis? Evidence of such a duality is to be found in references to both ‘the people’ and ‘the peoples’, signifying that while the move towards constructing a transnational common identity is present, the plurality of ‘the peoples’ with their distinct national/cultural identities still play a role in the discursive articulation. In an international populism it is the signifier ‘the peoples’ that takes priority, with references to the singular form ‘the people’ remaining rare and secondary. In a transnational populism it is the other way around, with ‘the (transnational) people’ being at the core of the articulation of a given discourse, while references to the plural form are also present yet more peripheral. To add the post-national type in the picture, what one observes in this case is that the plurality of ‘the peoples’ does not occupy a place, primary or secondary, in the *chain of signification*.

MAPPING TRANSNATIONAL POPULISM

So far, I have laid out the theoretical premises for conceiving transnational populism, along with international and post-national populism. I have also focused on examining the specificity of this type of populism. The question that remains to be examined now is whether transnational populism is an observable phenomenon in practice. I will thus turn my attention to some empirical examples that have been examined as cases of transnational populism.

One case that has been discussed as moving towards a transnational populist direction is the Pink Tide of Latin America that gathered momentum at the turn of the twenty-first century (Moffitt 2017; De Cleen 2017; Panayotu 2017). Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador were united under their shared anti-neoliberal agenda (see Ellner 2012). In this context, Chávez attempted to speak of ‘the people’ of Latin America or even ‘the people’ of the Global South and not only of ‘the people’ of Venezuela (Moffitt 2017: 412). Other critical moments in this case are the constitution of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) in 2004, the formation of the Union of

South American Nations in cooperation with Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay in 2008 and the creation of a virtual regional currency, the SUCRE, in 2008 (first used in 2010) which intended to replace the United States dollar (Ellner 2012: 104; Henderson 2020). Ultimately, the Latin American Pink Tide was mostly ‘a collection of national phenomena’ where the ‘language of the nation and its people’ (Souvlis and Mazzolini 2016) played a very significant role – so significant, that it might have undermined its transnational character. In fact, De Cleen highlights that this political movement was ‘more about the inter-national ties between nationally organised populisms... than about a truly trans-national politics’ (2017: 355). Laura Henderson offers a counterargument by stressing that the endeavour to construct a transnational people that goes beyond a simple cooperation between national populist projects is present, in particular with regard to ALBA and the central role of Morales in this initiative (2020: 134). More specifically, the transnational and inclusive character of ALBA and Morales’ discourse is evident in the aim to expand ‘the indigenous consciousness beyond the Bolivian national borders to link together Bolivia’s marginalised peoples with other marginalised peoples across the world to envision a new type of citizenship’ (Henderson 2020: 135). While it certainly displayed some significant transnational characteristics, such as references to ‘the people’ of Latin America and the creation of the above-mentioned institutions that put the emphasis on the transnational dimension, the Latin American ‘Pink Tide’ is best understood as a case of international populism. This is because the different national peoples are loosely integrated in its chain of equivalence and, in the last instance, ‘the people of Latin America’ plays a secondary, peripheral role, while ‘the peoples’ in the plural occupy a more central position (see Moffitt 2017), indicating the most prevalent role of national identities and the nation itself.

Another example of transnational populism that has been discussed in the literature is the Occupy and Indignados movements in the United States and Europe in 2011 (see De Cleen 2017; Moffitt 2017; Pelfini 2014). As Alejandro Pelfini observes, the struggle to reduce inequality at the transnational level and not mainly within particular national contexts occupies centre stage in the Occupy movement (2014: 201). Speaking of the ‘99%’, the suffering ‘people’, against the ‘1%’, corrupted political and economic elites, and calling for democratic accountability and the restoration of popular sovereignty shows how the various Occupy movements from Occupy Wall Street to Occupy London share a similar populist frame with the Indignados movements in Spain and Greece (see Aslanidis 2018). However, what was evident in the Occupy and Indignados movements was that ‘the national or local character of “the people” spoken for remained central’ (Kuyper and Moffitt 2020: 34). There was no attempt to create a transnational people with a strong common identity complementing the national or local identities of its counterparts. Instead of prioritizing a transnational/global space as the Global Justice Movement did, these movements claimed the nation as ‘the central battleground’ (Gerbaudo 2017: 125; see also Flesher Fominaya 2017: 5–6). It might be more accurate, then, to consider this case as one of international populism attempting to create loose ties of solidarity among national peoples rather than creating a transnational people.

The third example I shall briefly consider takes us to the *radical right* end of the political spectrum. Moffitt examines the endeavour of Geert Wilders to present himself as the voice of ‘the people’ of the Western world, creating the International Freedom Alliance in 2010 with the aim to ‘protect *our* nations’ from Islam (2017: 413). More recently, radical right parties in Europe, such as Marine Le Pen’s Front National (renamed in 2018 Rassemblement National (National Rally)), Alternative for Germany and Wilder’s Party for Freedom, among

others, have tried to develop closer ties with one another, establishing in 2015 their own political group in the European Parliament called the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) (McDonnell and Werner 2019: 127–160). For Duncan McDonnell and Annika Werner, these parties ‘mix “international populism” and “transnational populism”, by presenting themselves not just as saviours of their nations, but of Europe’ (2019: 17). While there might be references to a common Western, in the case of International Freedom Alliance, or European, in the case of ENF, civilization, that these actors want to defend and save (McDonnell and Werner 2019), labelling these cases as instances of transnational populism, or at the very least as a mix of inter and transnational populism, would be a false assumption. They are not transnational, as any attempt to construct a transnational ‘people’ is absent and is arguably not even desirable (see De Cleen et al. 2020: 153). One could even question their populist character, as the antagonism they construct is first and foremost structured through a nativist opposition between European nations and its out-groups, which takes the name of ‘Islam’. While ‘the people’ might indeed be a central reference of their discourse, it is quite evident that this people is understood in nationalist/nativist terms and, as Giorgos Katsambekis notes, one should be more critical to this *automatic* conflation ‘of “the people” with the nation or the natives’ (2022: 54). It is the national aspect and the defence of ‘our nations’ that comes first here, while the European dimension is secondary. These alliances, in other words, constitute a *marriage of convenience* between nationally defined peoples understood in ethnic-cultural/nativist terms. In the last instance, a peculiar form of Western or European, international nativism is what really seems to characterize these cases.

Dominik Schmidt (2021) has brought together the studies that have analysed the discourse of Greta Thunberg, a prominent young environmental activist, as populist (see e.g. Beeson 2019), and those that have emphasized the transnational dimension of the School Strike for Climate movement that she initiated (see Murphy 2021). His main argument is that Thunberg attempts to form a ‘global people’ that is defined by its opposition to the ‘inaction of “world leaders”’ in the face of the threat of climate change (Schmidt 2021: 69). The identity of ‘the people’ in this case takes a more universal content. References to ‘humanity’ against ‘world leaders’ occupy centre stage (Schmidt 2021). This equation of ‘the people’ with humanity that is juxtaposed to a set of elites and big businesses around the world, however, might be an indicator of a move towards a post-national direction instead of a merely transnational one. The signifiers ‘nation-state’ or, individually, ‘nations’ and ‘states’ are not used at all in many of her speeches (see e.g. Thunberg 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020). Interestingly, this is the case even when she addresses national parliaments such as the French National Assembly (Thunberg 2019b) or the United Kingdom Parliament (Thunberg 2019c). ‘The people’ that is constructed here has almost no reference or connection to the national level. The deterritorialized and borderless character of ecological demands contributes to that end. A universal humanhood can not only transcend national identities but also replace them, producing a sort of post-national articulation of ‘the people’ (see Soysal 1994). This, coupled with the disregard of the national level and indeed the effort to leave the nation-state behind, brings this case closer to post-national populism.

Moving on from rather contested examples, there seems to be a consensus in the relevant literature that the Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25) constitutes the most paradigmatic case of transnational populism (see Agustín 2021; Blokker 2019; Bonfert 2022; De Cleen et al. 2020; Moffitt 2017; Panayotu 2017). DiEM25 is a pan-European initiative launched by the ex-finance minister Yanis Varoufakis and the Croatian author and politi-

cal activist Srećko Horvat in February 2016. The aim of DiEM25 has been to expand the populist spirit of the anti-austerity wave to the European level by forming a transnational, pan-European movement. The demand to ‘put the demos back to democracy against the European Union establishment that sees people power as a threat to its authority’ along with the demand for a European Union that works ‘for the people not against the people’ reveal the populist character of DiEM. The idea put forward is that there is an urgent need to go beyond the fetishism of national boundaries to envisage an alternative and thus DiEM attempts to construct a transnational people in the name of democracy against what they describe as “Europe’s deep establishment” (see DiEM25 2017).

‘The people’ in DiEM25 is not restricted to the national level. On the contrary, it goes beyond the nation-states and speaks of ‘the people’ at the pan-European level. This is where things become slightly more complicated as DiEM25 oscillates between speaking in the name of ‘the people’ of Europe and of ‘the peoples’ of Europe (see De Cleen et al. 2020: 154). This oscillation is not always a coincidence. Take, for instance, the following extract: ‘The Constitution, elaborated by *the peoples of Europe*, would become the source of legitimacy and sovereignty. It will be the beginning of a new age: the age of “*We, the People of Europe*”’ (DiEM25 2018: 4, emphasis mine).

This ‘new age’ involves a process of constructing a common identity, *a European people* through the participation of nationally bound peoples in a common cause. Thus, this ambiguity between the use of the singular ‘the people’ and the plural ‘the peoples’ is not a mere oscillation, at least not always. It rather denotes an open-ended process of unification. A process through which the transnational people is not meant to ever totally merge or suppress the heterogeneity of ‘the peoples’ and their national identities. This becomes apparent in one of the most important documents of the movement, the *European New Deal*, where we read that DiEM25 should aim at the construction of a truly transnational identity, ‘a real European identity’ (DiEM25 2017: 87). The critical element is that with this DiEM does not aim to replace national identities but rather to supplement them. As Varoufakis explains, ‘on top of our existing multiple identities, it is not only possible but also empowering to overlay a new one – a transnational identity of our own making: radical, anti-authoritarian, democratic Europeanism’ (Varoufakis 2016).

This oscillation, then, does not mean that DiEM25 remains tethered to the national level (see De Cleen et al. 2020) nor that it constitutes a case of inter rather than transnational populism concerning mostly an ‘international cooperation between nationally defined populist claims’ (Fanoulis and Guerra 2020: 222). As I indicated earlier, transnationalism means between *and* beyond the nation-states, and thus a transnational populism does not completely escape from the national dimension. Rather than neglecting it, DiEM25 attempts to intervene in the national level, as its organizational structure, with organs that move from the transnational to the national and local levels, reveals. DiEM25 has even created its own *electoral wings* in Greece, Germany and Italy, which are best regarded as national electoral vehicles of a transnational mother movement. This makes DiEM25 a unique case of a transnational populist movement party, where national political parties take over the duty of adapting DiEM25’s agenda to particular national contexts.

All in all, DiEM25 satisfies all the elements of transnational populism: the construction of a transnational people characterized by a dual character through a chain of equivalence that integrates different national peoples and the prioritization of the transnational space that feeds into the national one.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this chapter was to create a typology able to conceptualize and examine populism beyond and/or above the nation-state, contrasting the national to the transnational and accounting for possibilities at the international and the post-national levels. As we have seen, populist politics and the populist construction of ‘the people’ can take place out of the nation-state, complicating the picture of those who maintain that in the absence of the nation-state there can be no people (see Virno 2004: 22).

The chapter offered a framework for the study of populism beyond the nation by differentiating transnational from international and post-national populism. Up until now the relevant literature has examined the first two, distinguishing them from one another on the grounds of the absence of a strong sense of collective identity in international populism, which is a rather flexible and loose alliance between different national peoples. By adding the post-national dimension one is able to provide a clear picture of a set of critical issues regarding the role of the national level in transnational populism and the *aporia* of the transnational people. In contrast to the working assumption that a transnational populism *bypasses* the nation-state, I argued that there is an inherent duality in the understanding of transnationalism which entails that the nation-state is not deleted from the equation. It is post-national populism that requires a move towards the negation of the nation-state and national identities themselves. The collective identity of ‘the people’ constructed by transnational populism is marked by a *duality*, articulating the national and the transnational as coexisting moments of the same identity. The methodological contribution that accompanies this framework concerns, among others, the ambiguity in the use of the signifiers ‘the people’ in the singular and ‘the peoples’ in the plural. This has been considered so far as a sign of an international rather than a proper transnational populism. However, seeing transnational populism in this light proves that this ambiguity is in fact evidence of the aforementioned duality.

The chapter has also sought to examine a set of empirical examples that have been regarded as cases of transnational populism. At this point, DiEM25 offers a key case study for this phenomenon. The fact that transnational populist forces like DiEM25 have to operate within a world where the nation-state is still predominant makes the construction of a transnational people a challenging task. However, as globalization, in its neoliberal version, led to a divorce between power and politics, with the former migrating to the global level and the latter remaining tethered to the national and local levels (Bauman and Bordoni 2014: 12), one can assume that more and more transnational populist forces will emerge, attempting to respond to the ‘absence of agency’ on a level beyond the nation-state.

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PART VII

HOTSPOTS

33. Latin America

Enrico Padoan

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes, one has the impression that, in Europe and increasingly in the United States, ‘populism’ is mostly used as a derogatory concept to identify either the contemporary radical right or, casting a wider net, plain demagoguery: a concept popularized mainly during the last 20 years. In Latin America, populism as an explanatory concept, while still contested, has nearly a century-old history, which is distinct. This chapter, while not having the ambition of detailing a proper history of the usage of the concept in Latin America, focuses on its main evolution for defining and being applied to the main Latin American ‘populist waves’ as identified by the literature.

This exercise aims at highlighting the extent to which the old critiques of Eurocentrism advanced towards the early adoption of the concept of populism to analyse specific Latin American phenomena, while well-founded, pale in comparison to the current state of the debate in populism studies, which tend to adopt a restrictive – and, in the end, analytically problematic – conceptualization. A rigorous criticism of the current state of the art offers the possibility of rediscovering and debating anew the early structuralist-functionalist understanding of populist phenomena to analyse the latter in Latin America, and beyond.

CLASSIC POPULISMS (1930s–1950s)

The governments led by Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina (1946–1955), by Getúlio Vargas (1930–1945 and 1951–1954), as well as Juscelino Kubitschek (1956–1961) and João Goulart (1961–1964) (both belonging to one of the *varguistas* parties) in Brazil and by Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940) in Mexico are the most famous examples of the so-called ‘classic populisms’ in Latin America. Such complex experiences originated from military coups (or, in Mexico, within a single-party regime) and were eventually confirmed in power by popular elections (and, in Argentina and Brazil, demised by coups). Classic populist governments were marked by: (1) a process of incorporation (Collier and Collier 1991) of the masses – involving both a ‘broadening of citizenship through labour rights’ (Grigera 2017) and forms of corporatist representation, typically through (industrial and, in the Mexican case, rural) trade unions linked to mass parties’ organizations (Collier and Collier 1991); (2) inward-looking models of development; and (3) particularly in the Argentine and Brazilian cases, a strongly nationalist and anti-Communist inspiration.

How have these been theorized by academia? Accusations of ‘Eurocentrism’ towards theoretical approaches to populism in Latin America have a long history. We refer here to the works by sociologists such as Torcuato Di Tella, Gino Germani and Octavio Ianni, who – with different nuances – converged into a structuralist-functionalist approach, highly indebted to modernization theory (e.g. Lipset 1960) to explain the emergence of classic populisms in the

sub-continent. However, this literature gradually incorporated into their framework several elements from studies on dependency – which precisely entered the debate as a reaction against modernization theory (De La Torre 2001; O'Donnell 1973), while ending with sharing several assumptions and interpretations (Jansen 2011). As put by Ianni (1975: 15–17), classic populisms correspond to:

[a] specific stage of the evolution of the contradictions between the national society [*sociedad nacional*] and the dependent economy', since 'the essence of the populist government – where populism concretely displays its features – is to find a new combination between social tendencies [i.e. social dislocations and labour transformations accompanying the transition from traditional to modern society] and those determinations brought by economic dependency.

When emphasizing the effects of such 'social tendencies', scholars adhering to this approach partly tend to read populism as a cultural deviation from a European standard, typical of underdeveloped (*subdesarrolladas*) countries: as a form of political integration of 'available masses manipulated' by a leader building on the coexistence of pre-modern values and modern forms of social organization. However, this is not the entire story that such literature seems to convey. Populism is a 'socio-cultural' but also a 'political process', because the 'collapse of the liberal or authoritarian oligarchies opened the space for a reorganization of the state apparatus' (Ianni 1975: 17). This reorganization entailed, in fact, a 'faith' in the 'capacity of the state to institutionalize and integrate' (Grigera 2017: 444) the masses, who 'appeared in the scene as a dynamic and creative political element' (Ianni 1975: 17). Populism, almost everywhere in Latin America, either in more (Argentina, Brazil, Mexico) or less (Peru, Ecuador under President Velasco Ibarra) economically developed countries, meant the beginning, as well as the precondition, of the mass politics era (Di Tella et al. 1975).

According to these accounts, populism is all about the creation of a 'mobilizing coalition' (*coalición movilizacionista*). Populist appeals are interclassist, albeit not catch-all, since they typically target urban popular sectors – divided into a disorganized working class and a floating proletariat employed in the informal sectors – and an 'anti-status quo elite' willing to challenge the elite in power and, for this purpose, 'manipulating' the 'available masses' (Germani 1965) in order to gain power. Such an 'anti-status quo elite' is pushed by several factors to undertake such an enterprise, both cultural ('status incongruence') and economic (the persistence of an export-led economic model dominated by the old rural oligarchy). The growing urban proletariat – created by a rapidly modernizing society – set favourable political opportunity structures for the rise of populist parties.

Di Tella and Ianni emphasized the change in the historical function carried by the 'liberal state': from a successful challenge to the aristocratic state of the nineteenth century to a conservative institution eventually defending the interests of a fraction of the middle class (the main historical example here is the trajectory of Argentine *yrigoyenismo* (1916–1930)). They also pointed at the role of social stratification due to a developing (but still not fully developed) process of industrialization within dependent capitalism. Social stratification existed both at the elite level (export-led versus industrial bourgeoisie, increasingly aligned with new urban middle classes) and at the popular sector level (working-class aristocracy versus informal sectors versus peasantry, all of which strongly varied in their organizational capacity). All of this was understood as the structural determinants of Latin American 'classic' populist experiences.

Simply put, it can be argued that, over time, the focus of this broad literature switched from the Eurocentric, teleological approach typical of modernization theory, highlighting the integrative role of Latin American populisms in the passage from pre-modern to modern societies – implicating a sort of ‘deviation’ from the patient organization of unions and union-based parties typical of Europe – to a greater interest on populism as analysed through the lens of international political economy, under the influence of dependency theories. Both approaches were mainly elaborated on the basis of Argentinean, Brazilian and Mexican experiences. However, early studies also applied to different populist experiences in countries such as Ecuador (Velasco Ibarra) and Peru (not only *aprismo* but also *odriismo* and, much earlier, the meteoric rise of Sánchez Cerro), emphasizing their key role in favouring (and decisively shaping) the advent of the mass politics era.

Instead, late studies mostly linked populism to a political process typical of the industrializing countries. This process implied: (1) working-class ‘incorporation’ (defined by Ruth and David Collier as ‘the first sustained and at least partially successful attempt by the state to legitimate and shape an institutionalized labor movement’; 1991: 783), more than the mere voting encapsulation of (highly segmented) popular sectors; (2) a critique of the linear and functionalist model of socio-economic and political development predicted by modernization theory; and (3) an explicit and consequential connection between populist processes and specific economic policies, in particular the import substitution industrialization (ISI) model consisting of protectionism (the *capitalismo nacional* praised by Perón) and, more broadly, the transition from an export-led to an inward-oriented development based on the support of internal demand: i.e. the kind of economic model favouring the interests of industrial bourgeoisie and the working class, as well as the new urban poor (through particularistic social policies) vis-à-vis agrobusiness and oligarchic elites in extractive sectors, as well as the peasantry.

As late as 1991, Ruth and David Collier indeed described populism, through a definition explicitly indebted to Di Tella’s analysis, as follows: a ‘political movement characterized by mass support from the urban working class and/or peasantry; a strong element of mobilization from above; a central role of leadership from the middle sector or elite, typically of a personalistic and/or charismatic character; and an anti-status-quo, nationalist ideology and program’ (Collier and Collier 1991: 788). ‘Mass support of the peasantry’ occurred in populist movements in less developed countries and/or where the primary sector occupied the highest percentage of economically active population, as for instance in Mexico, Bolivia and Venezuela, typically through the incorporation/co-optation of rural unions (e.g. the Military–Peasantry Pact in Bolivia during the 1960s). The class component of populisms and its ‘nationalist ideology’, together with its economic component and the new ‘state attributions’ mentioned by Ianni (1975), were thus considered *defining* features.

O’Donnell (1973), in particular, emphasized, from an international political economy perspective the connection between populism and the ISI model, as well as the trajectory of the latter. The exhaustion of the early, ‘easy’ phase – when, as put by Drake (1982), populism advocated, differently from socialism, a ‘reformist set of policies tailored to promote development without explosive class conflict’ – and the inflationary tendencies linked to shortage in foreign currencies and salary pressures were understood as determinants of the authoritarian turns of the 1950s and (more drastically) of the 1970s ‘disconfirming’ linear democratization models.

The connection between populism and ISI offered to conservative economists such as Rudiger Dornbusch, Sebastian Edwards and Jeffrey Sachs (one of the key advisors in the

process of neoliberalization of the Bolivian economy under the last presidency of Paz Estenssoro (1985–1989)) the opportunity to define the concept of ‘economic populism’ as ‘an approach to economics that emphasizes growth and income redistribution and deemphasizes the risks of inflation and deficit finance, external constraints, and the reaction of economic agents to aggressive nonmarket policies’ (Dornbusch and Edwards 1992: 9). Despite the authors’ premise – arguably a sort of *excusatio non petita*: ‘the purpose in setting out this paradigm is not a righteous assertion of conservative economics’ – the edited book by Dornbusch and Edwards is presented as ‘rather a warning that populist policies do ultimately fail’ (1992: 9). The book offered a structuralist interpretation of the recurrent appearance of ‘populist economic policies’ in Latin America, pointing at the consequences of high levels of inequality and of sectoral – urban versus rural – divides easing the creation of a ‘national’ interclassist alliance. However, the key argument of Dornbusch and Edwards’ book was that populism is both a pathology and an independent variable: ‘if not irrationality, at least ignorance of basic economic criteria is a necessary ingredient of any valid explanation’ to account for the implementation of populist policies (Guido Di Tella 1992: 119). Overall, the theory of economic populism (TEP; as named in an excellent recent critical analysis by Aslanidis 2021) has been an ideological argument showing to Latin American policymakers the good model to follow – namely, the export-led development of the Asian Tigers – as well as the inherent failures of the populist ISI model, economically detrimental as well as politically irreformable, because of the incorporation and the progressive empowerment of the popular sectors making it particularly difficult to implement the savvy and ‘responsible’ policies suggested by orthodox economic advisors.

Such an ideological argument became hegemonic in the 1980s and 1990s, as Paul Drake highlighted in a quite critical and even ironic intervention in Dornbusch and Edwards’ book:

Free enterprise solutions modeled after the East Asian success stories are in vogue. It has become fashionable and virtually unavoidable to reduce government interference with domestic and international markets. Partly as a result of those economic transformations, the long-standing enemies of populism – capitalist and export elites – have been strengthened, while the stalwarts of populism-organized labor and the urban masses have been weakened. Furthermore, after years of authoritarian repression of labor and the left, reformist politicians have tried to restrain populist impulses so as not to capsize democratization... The problem is how to bridge the gap between the political, electoral logic of speaking to the desperate needs of the deprived majority and the economic, governing logic of adhering to the requirements of investors and entrepreneurs. In democratic political systems, the trick is to design a new winning coalition that can sustain equitable growth. Today, most of Latin America is plagued with poverty, not populism. (Drake 1992: 40)

The concept of ‘economic populism’ has been mainly criticized because of its flawed empirical bases (‘irresponsible’ macroeconomic policies have been implemented by both populist and non-populist governments, and the same applies to much more prudent macroeconomic management – e.g. Mexico during the 1960s under a supposedly populist government; see Knight 1998) and for its complete lack of indicators, making the theory tautological (i.e. the outcome by itself – economic disaster – makes it possible to understand if we face a case of ‘economic populism’ or not; see Aslanidis 2021; Knight 1998). As for the first criticism, Edwards himself (2010), in a later revisitation of his theory, admitted:

these neopopulists [the reference here is to the Chávez and Kirchner experiences: see below] seem to understand the need for maintaining overall fiscal prudence and reasonably low inflation [but] it

is still too early to know if these populist politicians will be willing or able to maintain fiscal caution during a major downturn such as those generated by the global crash of 2008. (Edwards, 2010: 171)

More than a defence, this goes right to the core of the problem. TEP defined ‘economic populism’ as a (wrong) ‘approach to economics’. The ‘defensive argument’ branded by Edwards clearly shows that the adoption of the ‘populist’ label served to associate such a wrong ‘approach’ to specific (disliked) political experiences primarily aiming at mobilizing the support of popular sectors – and such political experiences still remain suspiciously ‘populist’ even when they have not pursued ‘economic populist strategies’ (yet!).

Indeed, the original sin of populism according to TEP seems to be its mobilization of popular sectors (which is, *en passant*, what democracy in highly unequal societies is about). In Dornbusch and Edwards (1992), we can read that ‘under [authoritarian governments], populist policies are unlikely, since the government is not primarily reliant on public support. Nevertheless, the end of an authoritarian period may produce populist-like policies aimed at softening the military’s reputation before they return to the barracks’ (Kaufman and Stallings 1992: 22). The authors use the term ‘populist-like’ because ‘just some isolated policies’ are not enough to define a government as ‘populist’: for them, a necessary condition is ‘mobilizing support within organized labor and lower-middle-class groups; obtaining complementary backing from domestically oriented business; and politically isolating the rural oligarchy, foreign enterprises, and large-scale domestic industrial elites’ (Kaufman and Stallings 1992: 16). The logical consequence is that all kinds of political projects having those political goals in mind – i.e. to build a specific interclass alliance mostly centred on the mobilization of popular sectors – invariably ends with falling into ‘economic populism’ and thus into economic disaster.

TEP can also be understood as a bridge between the structuralist approaches of the 1960s and the 1970s and the ‘agentic’ approaches (Jansen 2011) that would emerge particularly since the 1990s. On the one hand, TEP still relies on well-known analyses on the medium-term shortcomings of the ISI model, and on the peculiar cross-class coalitions sustaining this model, to offer a political-economic explanation of the rise and fall of populist governments in Latin America. In this sense, TEP is the right-wing counterpart of Marxist-structuralist critiques to ‘classic populisms’: ‘Rightist groups lashed populists as demagogues who spurred excessive mass expectations and inflation. At the same time, leftists denounced populists as charlatans who duped the workers into settling for reform instead of revolution’ (Drake 1992: 40). On the other hand, TEP separates ‘economic populism’ from ‘populist economic policies’ (that are typical, but not exclusive, of populist governments) and from ‘populist governments’, who are characterized by specific political goals, including – centrally – the ‘mobilization of the people’. This separation opens the possibility of a ‘political definition of populism’ (Weyland 1996, 2001), i.e. a definition emphasizing specific discursive, stylistic and/or organizational characteristics of the phenomenon, instead of specific (redistributive) economic policies and typical class alliances.

NEOPOPULISMS (1990s)

Paraphrasing Paul Drake, one major way to ‘bridge the gap between the political, electoral logic of speaking to the... deprived majority and the... requirements of investors and entrepre-

neers' was, again, populism, albeit of quite a different kind from the 'classic' one. The rise to power of leaders from populist parties running quite traditional populist electoral campaigns and then rapidly implementing drastic neoliberal reforms apparently challenged the structuralist approaches prevailing for a long time, as well as TEP. As we saw, the latter talked about a 'learning effect' by populist leaders (they finally understood the lesson!), while structuralist scholars advanced the so-called 'bait and switch' thesis (Drake 1992; Stokes 2001). According to the latter, populist leaders such as Carlos Menem in Argentina, Fernando Collor in Brazil and Alberto Fujimori in Peru won popular support on populist campaigns and then – differently from failed attempts (Alfonsín in Argentina, García in Peru) of pursuing economic recovery through 'non-orthodox' measures – implemented harsh pro-market reforms: in two of these three cases, in fact, populist leaders maintained a high level of support because of their success in dealing with hyperinflation (the exception was Collor in Brazil). Put otherwise, they were not populist anymore.

Kurt Weyland argued against both these accounts. He claimed that such 'neoliberal populists' (neopopulists) fully deserved the populist label and that attaching specific economic policies to the definition of the concept of populism was flawed: he denounced 'the inadequate assumption of the incompatibility of populism and economic liberalism' (Weyland, 1996: 5). Weyland proposed:

[a] purely political notion of populism [which is] a political strategy with three characteristics: a personal [sic] leader appeals to a heterogeneous mass of followers, many of whom have been excluded from the mainstream of development, yet are now available for mobilization; the leader reaches the followers in a seemingly direct, quasi-personal manner that largely bypasses established intermediary organizations, such as parties and interest associations; if the leader builds new organizations or revives earlier populist organizations, they remain personal vehicles with low levels of institutionalization. (Weyland 1996: 5)

First, it must be noted that such a definition did not discard a sociological element. Weyland indeed recognized that 'classical populisms... had their primary following among urban workers and the provincial lower middle class. By contrast, neopopulists... sought support disproportionately among the urban informal sector and the rural poor' (1996: 5). However, the emphasis is put on the charismatic 'bonding' (Knight 1998) between the leader and the 'mass', in a way echoing Germani's arguments over 'available masses' in search of cultural integration. As a mere political 'strategy' put in place by leaders looking to capture power for the sake of power, Weyland also recuperated, expanded and, recently, confirmed in 2021TEP's considerations on the intrinsic 'opportunism' of populist leaders in their economic platforms, whatever they are (either expansionary and thus short-sighted, as in the case of classic populisms, or 'orthodox' and thus betraying the promises in electoral campaigns, as in the case of neopopulisms).

Weyland's conceptualization starts by highlighting the 'inherent affinities between [its definition of] populism and neoliberalism' and the 'appeal to informal sectors' against 'rent-seeking' sectors, including the organized working class; also the common target found in the 'political class', and the consequent 'top-down', decisionist strategy bypassing institutional veto players. Some of these claims are quite accurate empirically, others much less so: it is difficult to read Menem as an 'anti-political outsider', once considering that under his leadership the Justicialist Party became, even more than before, a clientelist electoral machine with plenty of professional political brokers (Levitsky 2003). In any case, despite its anchoring

in political-economic analysis, Weyland's definition has been rightly criticized because of its excessive reliance on the empirical analysis of neopopulisms. Arguing that 'the leader reaches the followers in a seemingly direct, quasi-personal manner that largely bypasses established intermediary organizations, such as parties and interest associations' seems quite exaggerated. This claim relied on a very partial analysis¹ of classic Peronism and, more generally, of other classic populisms: all the most enduring and institutionalized Latin American parties in the past century (Peruvian American Popular Revolutionary Alliance, Argentine Justicialist Party, Mexican Institutional Revolutionary Party, Bolivian Revolutionary Nationalist Movement; see Ostiguy 2018) derived from classic populist experiences that decisively contributed to strengthening, through incorporation – which, for sure, also implied co-optation – the national labour movements.

Overall, the weaknesses (or ideological biases) of Weyland's conceptualization becomes evident when arguing for the intrinsic 'opportunism' of populist leaders, as well as for his emphasis on a (highly simplified, because completely unidirectional) 'top-down' relationship with the unorganized masses – which, as we saw, have been historically much less 'unorganized' than claimed by the author. As for 'opportunism', it is particularly interesting to note Weyland's recent reply to a highly critical article of his 'political strategy approach' by Daniel Rueda (2020). Weyland offers thus an empirical demonstration of the accuracy of his approach:

Latin America's neoliberal populists (e.g. Fujimori) quickly imposed shock programs, despite rejecting them during the election campaign. Chavez suddenly enacted massive social programs in 2003 – because he faced a dangerous recall referendum. And after attacking Brazil's corrupt establishment politicians, Bolsonaro incongruously allied with them when confronting threats of impeachment. All these unexpected departures suggest opportunism. (Weyland 2021: 186)

Setting apart the 'bait and switch' strategy by 'neopopulists' (if they had not enacted such orthodox programmes, they would have been dubbed as 'economic populists' by someone else), the cases of Chávez and Bolsonaro are quite telling of the ideological biases of such an approach: populist leaders are not allowed to have in mind their re-election (or have a look at popular support) or to practise compromises as everybody else, because the risk of being labelled as opportunistic is always there.

Interestingly, in his most important conceptual article on populism (2001), Weyland praises the contribution by Ernesto Laclau as it helps to reaffirm the 'autonomy of politics' against 'historicist' (i.e. modernization and dependency theories) approaches. Yet, Laclau highlights the transformative and progressive potential of populism, while Weyland emphasizes its 'manipulative' and its inherently anti-(liberal) democratic features. Both stress the possibility of practising 'populist strategies', but for very different ideological reasons. Laclau's radical post-structuralism is not endorsed by Weyland, who still registered the association between specific 'populist waves' (classic populisms, neopopulisms, etc.) and specific *classes gardées* (urban working class, urban poor, etc.). However, as shown above, Weyland ended up attaching the 'populist label' also to figures such as Jair Bolsonaro, supported by very different constituencies. This is quite congruent with his 'political' approach but, as we will discuss below, it also reveals some of the conceptual stretching (and ideological biases) that 'non-historicist' approaches can impose on the concept of populism.

POPULISMS OF THE PINK TIDE (TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY)

In arguably the best account of Latin American party system realignments following the crisis of the neoliberal model and the emergence of the so-called ‘Pink Tide’, or ‘Leftist Turn’, Kenneth Roberts argues that ‘populism flourishes where large numbers of citizens are excluded or alienated from traditional parties – that is, where partisanship is fragile, fluid, or fleeting’ (Roberts 2014: 37). In particular, where left-of-centre, or former ‘labour-based’ parties,² got involved in the implementation of neoliberal reforms, the party system passed through a phase of ‘neoliberal convergence’ paving the way for a rise in new populist challengers when the Washington Consensus stopped being consensual. The presidencies of Hugo Chávez, Néstor and Cristina Kirchner, Evo Morales and Rafael Correa, just to name the most famous ones, exemplified this trend, while social-democratic lefts characterized by strong linkages with the traditional union movements – e.g. the Partido dos Trabalhadores in Brazil, the Frente Amplio in Uruguay – reached power in countries where pro-market reforms were pushed forward by the right.

Following the ‘neopopulist’ parenthesis, the concept of ‘populism’ turned to be associated to a form of political mobilization (see also Jansen 2011) but also, more broadly, to a political phase linked to specific structural processes, social constituencies and socio-economic models of development. Roberts (2014: 77) explicitly went back to treat populism in its ‘classical sense [and thus as] political movements that mobilize heterogeneous but predominantly lower- and working-class constituencies for social reform and state-led capitalist development’. The populisms of the Pink Tide differed ideologically, organizationally and in terms of economic policies from the social-democratic lefts (Padoan 2020) and, as happened with ‘classic populisms’, were harshly criticized for very different reasons. Some emphasized the ‘delegative’ features, the disdain for institutional checks and balances (Levitsky and Way 2012), the tendency of overrelying on shaky sources of revenue (by basically exploiting the ‘commodity boom’ of the first decade of the new century) and thus of failing to set solid institutional bases for their redistributive social programmes (see de la Madrid et al. 2010; Pribble 2013). Other critiques, sharing the latter considerations, also pointed at both the deficiencies and the legacies of the ‘redistributive extractivism’ that left-wing populist governments pursued and that, in most cases, became an ‘easier path’ to avoid challenging deeper structural bases of social inequality (e.g. Svampa 2015).

Besides the aforementioned liberal and leftist critiques, other scholars stressed, instead, the main historical function carried out by the left-wing populist experiences in Latin America, i.e. a sort of ‘second incorporation’, this time involving ‘social forces other than labor’ (Silva and Rossi 2018: 311). The reference here is, among others, to the indigenous peasant movements in Bolivia, to the Argentine *piqueteros* (road blockers), to the composite urban movements in Venezuela (e.g. Silva 2009), all animating a long cycle of anti-neoliberal protests. These movements ‘led the struggle for popular sector inclusion... they were not always crucial links in economic production (hence the territorial nature of organization), nor, at times, were their demands even principally economic; however, their anti-neoliberal protests and mobilization had been extraordinarily disruptive’ (Silva and Rossi 2018: 311). Such a ‘second [populist] incorporation’ thus consisted in ‘a process of recognition and inclusion of popular sector and subaltern social groups’ interests, as well as frequently but not necessarily their organizations in the political arena, which comprises political parties, elections, executive and legislative institutions, and policy making’ (Silva and Rossi 2018: 311). The institutional outcome has

been the development of ‘corporatist-clientelistic’ forms of interest intermediation (quite at odds with Weyland’s ‘unmediated’ leader–mass relationship) able to ‘keep tensions over interests and policy preferences among organized social groups in the policy process manageable’ (Silva and Rossi 2018: 313) in the aftermath of a deep process of popular mobilization and organization. Overall, from a sympathetic viewpoint, left-wing populist governments ‘reactivated the idea that it is possible to process political demands constructed at the popular level through the state’ (Cadahia and Biglieri 2021: 60).

CONCLUSION

In all the three Latin American ‘populist waves’ briefly sketched in this chapter, the very different approaches to populist phenomena unanimously share at least two basic features. First, the rise of populisms has been strongly anchored to, and explained by, specific historical phases marked by the failures of existing political systems to represent emerging or expanding (in terms of number of) sectors, looking for their incorporation. Populist governmental experiences then dramatically shaped polities, socio-economic models and vested interests of different social sectors in the new social, political and economic phases they inaugurated. Second, populisms were *primarily* seen as addressing and representing ‘popular sectors’, while the ‘core constituencies’ of different populisms were located in different segments of such a broad category: the salaried, organized working class in classic populisms; urban informal workers in neoliberal populisms; and *organized* self-employed urban and rural workers in the populisms of the Pink Tide.

The emphasis was thus put on the historically representative function carried out by populist projects, and on the fact that populism is primarily about *el pueblo*, understood in socio-economic terms. This is surely not a ground-breaking statement; yet, it has been often overlooked, even forgotten. As we have seen, early analyses of Latin American populisms were much more informed by a political-sociological perspective emphasizing the factors stimulating the ‘demand side’ for populism; however, even when dealing with later populist waves, this perspective has not been completely overlooked, while complemented by a higher attention to ‘supply-side’ analyses (the search for ‘political definition’ praised by Weyland) aiming at describing the specific characteristics of populist leaders, parties, governments and movements.

Both ‘demand’ and ‘supply’ analyses have been repeatedly plagued by normative concerns, not necessarily ill-founded, but still often reflecting strong Eurocentric biases. As for early sociological analyses of classic populisms, teleological elements implicit in modernization theories tended to see populisms as a sort of ‘deviation’ from a supposed European standard of social, political and economic development. This also possibly led to an understanding of populist politics as indicative of ‘backward’ societies, where ‘available masses’ were ready to be mobilized by political outsiders – instead of a political process linked to dependent capitalism, as structural Marxist accounts suggested.

Overall, Eurocentrism in populism studies emerges when scholars downplay the specificities of structural processes and the existing social stratifications that paved the way for the emergence of populism and its reconfiguration of class alliances, while instead emphasizing the agentic role by the leaders. Not coincidentally, such biases were *much* more evident in supply-side, ‘purely political’ definitions of – and approaches to – populism. Not coinci-

dentally, these latter perspectives have become mainstream in populism studies, looking for concepts able to ‘travel’ around the world. Among other things, such perspectives isolated, and decontextualized, specific discursive and identitarian characteristics of Latin American populisms, such as the nationalist and, more recently, the ‘ethno-nationalist’ (de la Madrid 2008) components, historically filled with anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist connotations (Filc 2015). Furthermore, such perspectives understood populist rhetoric aiming to ‘downplay differences and emphasize similarities’ (Jansen, 2011) within the people as the discursive creation of a ‘homogeneous people’, ending up with equating populism with conservative, anti-pluralist and nativist views (Katsambekis 2022). In a similar vein, the different socio-economic recipes applied by Latin American populist governments, both in the classic (ISI model) and in the twenty-first-century experiences (post-neoliberal extractivism), in both cases cementing specific alliances of social sectors with different interests and reverting previous socio-economic models equally flawed by (other kinds of) shortcomings and benefitting different sectors, have been reduced to ‘economic populism’ (consisting in overpromising, deficit spending, redistributive – vote-seeking! – policies). On the ‘political’ side, populism has been reduced to a toolkit available to outsider politicians and parties to build support, to ‘build a people’, and is increasingly treated as a simplistic and ‘opportunistic’ discursive strategy.

This ahistorical drive, in this author’s view, can be primarily traced in the dominant ‘ideational’ approaches (e.g. Mudde 2004). However, it can also weaken post-structuralist accounts of populist phenomena emphasizing too much the discursive process of people-building, as if this has happened in a social vacuum and as if it could suffice for articulating a ‘people’ lacking any sort of *popular* (social, historical) characteristics. In this sense, an integration of the post-structuralist approaches with empirically informed approaches emphasizing the given socio-cultural divides (more respondent to a ‘popular versus middle-class’ antagonism than to a purely ‘people versus elite’ one) typically mobilized by populist projects (Ostiguy 2018) would be welcome. This would avoid attaching the populist label to political phenomena that are quite far away from championing an ‘incorporating’ function and that, not coincidentally, end up primarily attracting quite different constituencies. The reference here is to parties such as VOX in Spain or, even more problematically, leaders such as Bolsonaro in Brazil. In both these cases, fanciful categorizations such as ‘far-right populism’ or ‘authoritarian populism’ (along with the already well-established ‘populist radical right’) have been utilized. De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017) have forcefully alerted us to the perils of attaching the populist label to political phenomena which are primarily and essentially nationalist and conservative (in terms of values and legitimation of social and political hierarchies).

Furthermore, the broader sense here is that ‘populism’ is a victim of a process of conceptual recolonization. Put otherwise, the history of a concept indicates that it has been: (1) primarily and deeply elaborated in the Latin American context; (2) decontextualized, simplified and transformed into a catchy and noisy buzzword; (3) in this form, reimposed on the sub-continent to analyse political phenomena that may have something in common with the European ‘populist radical right’; but (4) is entirely at odds with socio-political processes of incorporation of subaltern sectors into the polity, which have been the distinctive function of Latin American populism in history. Since ‘far-right populisms’ (in Latin America and elsewhere) often explicitly aim at *reacting* to such processes of incorporation, to attach the populist label on them seems analytically erroneous, more than unnecessary.

NOTES

1. Weyland here started from Mouzelis' distinction (1985) between populism and clientelism as two alternative paths to popular sectors' incorporation, the former less relying on intermediate brokerage.
2. 'Labor-based parties are parties whose core constituency is organized labor' (Levitsky 2003: 4). Many labor-based parties were the party legacy – and partisan backbone – of the classic populist era in countries such as Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, Venezuela, Bolivia and Peru.

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34. Europe: North and South

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past 30 years, European politics has provided a hothouse for populist experimentation. A specific geographical pattern has been identified with regard to the dominant type of populism emerging across the continent. In Europe's North, exclusionary populism has on the whole been more successful (Kriesi and Pappas 2015). The South was not bereft of populist cases, but it was the economic crisis of 2008 that became a watershed moment, triggering the emergence of mainly inclusionary populisms (Caiani and Graziano 2019). Furthermore, across the inclusion/exclusion categories, Southern inclusionary populisms are said to be more likely to stress the economic dimension and exclusionary populisms more likely to stress the political or symbolic dimension (Bernhard and Kriesi 2019). North and South populisms are also expected to target different social, economic and/or cultural groups for inclusion and/or exclusion, with the former aiming to exclude migrants, foreigners and minorities and the latter calling for the inclusion of women, workers, the young, migrants, minorities and the LGBT community in their definitions of 'the people' (Font et al. 2021; Jessoula et al. 2021). The new globalization cleavage (Kriesi and Pappas 2015), varieties of capitalism (Roberts 2019) and welfare state regimes (Rovira-Kaltwasser and Zanotti 2021) are only some of the theories evoked to explain the established pattern. The sharp North–South divide portrayed by this geography of emerging European populisms resonates also with and reinforces the colonial/anti-colonial (or centre/periphery) metaphors that have resurfaced in European political antagonism since the economic crisis.

The aim of this chapter is to offer a different perspective on the North–South divide in European populisms by questioning the homogeneity of populisms within both exclusionary Northern and inclusionary Southern groups. Looking beyond demand-side economic and institutional explanations, we will focus on political agency, in particular, populist discourses across North and South, in order to shed light on how these discourses are deployed. We will analyse *variation* in the dimensions of inclusion/exclusion stressed by European populists from North and South and in the out-groups and in-groups they target across cases and over time. We will argue that the extent to which European parties deploy inclusionary/exclusionary populist discourses, their prioritization of particular key economic, political and symbolic dimensions and their choices about which specific in/out groups to target are highly dependent on how populists navigate the political context within which they are constrained to operate, including the prospect of government and the dominant dimensions of party competition. In so doing, we will paint a more complex and dynamic picture of the North–South geography of populisms and introduce insights that could contribute, alongside existing explanations, to explaining the success of different European populism types.

In the next section we review the literature on the North–South divide in European populisms. Then, we take a closer look at three successful exclusionary populist parties in Northern Europe and three successful inclusionary populist parties in the South, teasing out

variation through comparative content analysis of their election manifestos in the 2012–2017 period and highlighting common traits in terms of the deployment of populist discourses across North and South. The final section analyses key findings and the conclusions reflect on their broader implications, suggesting fruitful avenues for further research.

A GEOGRAPHY OF POPULISM TYPES IN EUROPE

The study of populism in Europe has recognized the importance of geography for the emergence of different populism types since its beginnings. Early works have focused mainly on case studies and small-N comparisons on cases from the North, particularly in Germany, the Netherlands and Scandinavian countries (Ignazi 2003; Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Mudde 2000). The imprint of these initial steps remains lasting even today, as populism has been used regularly as a synonym for fringe right-wing politics in the European context. It was the electoral and policy success of populist radical right parties in the North in the 1980s and 1990s, such as the National Front in France, the Centre Democrats in the Netherlands or the Free Democrats of Austria, that drew academic and public attention to the populist phenomenon in Europe. These parties appeared to speak inconvenient truths to power, while promoting nativist and authoritarian policies that called for the social exclusion of anyone that they saw as an outsider to their community, such as migrants and minorities (in terms of ethnic, linguistic, cultural and sexual orientation). Welfare chauvinism, restrictive citizenship practices and symbolic exclusion from the community were staples of these parties' public discourse and policy repertoires. The North(western) experience also recorded types of populism that differed from the far-right version in organizational, ideological and strategic terms over this period (Carter 2005; Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016; March 2007). Cases like the left populist Socialist Party in the Netherlands or the Party of Democratic Socialism in Germany did succeed (Hough 2000; Lucardie and Voerman 2019), but they tended to be considered exceptions. Given the economic prosperity of the North, as well as the long-lasting legacy of the Cold War, there seemed to be very little room for populist movements to emerge on the fringes of the left and distinguish themselves from the rather marginalized left-wing milieu to the left of social democracy in the North of Europe.

Things, however, changed after the financial crisis of 2008. The collapse of the financial and economic crisis in the European Union (EU) and the intensification of government policies of austerity and retrenchment of the European welfare state created a space for the emergence of populist movements that mobilized broad coalitions of diverse social groups, trying to include them on class or experiential bases. This has been particularly successful in Southern Europe, where these developments were felt the hardest. In this respect, the experiences of parties and movements, such as Podemos in Spain and SYRIZA in Greece, revealed a new dynamic between left-wing politics and populism in Europe (Katsambekis and Kioupiolis 2019). These electorally successful parties toned down the vanguardist claims of traditional left-wing parties, choosing instead to immerse themselves in the anti-austerity and pro-democracy movement of the time and aim to represent broader social demands in the public sphere (Tsakatika and Lisi 2014). They put forward policies such as the guaranteed basic income, recognition of new economic and social rights for the young, minorities and the LGBT community as well as visions of inclusive democratic citizenship and multi-culturalism. While offering a new narrative of who is included in 'the people' by reference to a broad social

coalition, which tended to include women, workers, the young, migrants and minorities, they also framed this coalition primarily in national terms, setting aside the more internationalist, class-based perspective of established left-wing movements (Custodi 2020). Even during this period, examples of exclusionary populism also surfaced in Southern Europe. The success of ANEL in Greece, a nationalist, populist party of the right, deviated from the inclusionary pattern (Fielitz 2019).

In a widely shared account, Hanspeter Kriesi and Takis Pappas (2015) found that the economic crisis of 2008 compounded and exacerbated a long-standing political crisis of representation in Europe. Against the background of the argument that populists win the support of those who find themselves on the ‘losing’ side of the new globalization-generated cleavage dividing European voters, they argued that far-right populists would tend to be successful in the North of Europe, redefining the economic crisis in cultural terms, while left populists would get their chance to rally support in the South by projecting a defensive, primarily economic narrative.

In the remainder of this chapter we will interrogate the homogeneity of the two populism type groups across the North/South divide. We will do so by turning to the importance of political supply in the success of populist parties (e.g. Betz 1993; Kitschelt and McGann 1995). The dominant narrative would lead us to expect that populists will primarily compete along one dimension: *economic*, aiming to include the less affluent, if in the South; and *symbolic*, aiming to exclude migrants, if in the North. Political supply explanations would, on the other hand, highlight the strategic adaptability of populist actors (Roberts 2019). From this perspective, we raise the expectation that they may be able to strategically adapt their discourses in terms of the dimensions along which they compete for votes and the choice of groups they target for inclusion/exclusion.

In what follows, we deploy comparative content analysis to examine the electoral manifestoes of six electorally successful populist actors: Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) and Alternative for Germany (AfD), exclusionary populist parties from Europe’s North, set against those of Spain’s Podemos, the Greek SYRIZA and Italy’s Five Star Movement (5SM), three inclusionary populist parties from Europe’s South. PVV, AfD, Podemos and 5SM are ‘new’ parties in terms of their organizational roots (Bolloyer 2013), while FPÖ (est. 1956) and SYRIZA (relying for the most part on a pre-existing party organization traceable back to the Greek Communist Party of the Interior, est. 1968) (Tsakatika and Eleftheriou 2013), can be considered ‘old’. In terms of government experience, AfD has consistently been a party of opposition, PVV has provided external support to a coalition government, FPÖ and Podemos have participated in government coalitions as minor partners, while 5SM and SYRIZA have been major partners in government coalitions. We mirror the mixed quantitative-qualitative approach adopted by Nuria Font et al. (2021), extending the findings of that study to the three exclusionary populist parties. The aim of the content analysis is exploratory. It is meant to identify the extent to which inclusionary/exclusionary discourses are deployed, the variation in the dimensions of inclusion/exclusion that populist parties privilege in their discourse and the social groups they single out for exclusion or inclusion. The analysis is conducted over five years (2012–2017) which capture two electoral periods. The 2014 European election manifestos are also covered for all parties involved. The time frame allows us to explore variation not only across cases but also over time.

NORTH AND SOUTH, A MORE NUANCED PICTURE

AfD started as a conservative Eurosceptic party in 2013 and had transformed itself into a fully fledged exclusionary populist radical right party by 2015. Counterintuitively, we find that the party was significantly more populist at its beginning compared to its subsequent years. Its manifesto for the 2013 federal elections contains a significant share of populist messages, emphasizing the material dimension. The qualitative analysis of this document reveals a party concerned with Germany's finance and monetary policy, calling for reduced EU powers and more financial and policy independence for Germany. In its 2014 manifesto for the European elections, the party toned down its populist calls, that is, reduced its anti-elite appeals, and shifted its focus more towards the symbolic dimension. Calling to 'stand up for Germany', AfD continued its criticism of the EU monetary and financial policy, but it also amplified its use of symbols, particularly related to dignity, civility and citizenship, and sovereignty. The party strongly prioritized the symbolic dimension in its manifesto for the 2017 federal elections. Outlining a more detailed policy offer, compared to the previous elections, AfD significantly altered its language. References to the need for protecting German culture, freedom and sovereignty can be found throughout the manifesto. Above all, however, the party placed an accent on German citizenship, regularly using the term 'citizens' and making multiple references to 'country citizenship' (*Staatsbürger/schaft*). In terms of out-groups that according to AfD should be excluded, there is a significant diversity. Whereas in 2013 and 2014 the party focused particularly on migrants and asylum seekers, its 2017 manifesto targets Muslims and Islam specifically. In a chapter called 'Islam in Conflict with the Liberal-Democratic Basic Order', the party calls for a significant restriction of the religious freedoms of Muslims and their expression in Germany. In contrast, AfD puts a particular emphasis on promoting (German) families and children, as particular groups that should receive special assistance from state policies.

The emphasis on protecting families and children is also well enshrined in the policies of FPÖ. During the studied period the party experienced an electoral surge, culminating with the achievement of more than a quarter of all votes in the 2017 federal elections. As the quantitative data reveal, however, the party had reduced its use of populist discourse between 2013 and 2017, shifting its priorities from the material towards the symbolic dimension. In 2013, FPÖ campaigned under the slogan of 'love thy neighbour', specifically Austrian citizens and people in general. No love was lost for anyone that did not fit this definition, as the party called for a broad curbing of welfare benefits for migrants and asylum seekers, including their exclusion from access to social welfare and housing. The party amplified its populist message in its 2014 manifesto for the European Parliament elections, while defining 'the people' in clearer nativist terms. They portrayed the EU as an elite project of globalization, regulation and surveillance, against which the cultural preservation of Austrians must be seen as a primary objective. According to the party, this can be achieved through migration restriction and preferential treatment towards locals as opposed to asylum seekers particularly. In contrast to the 2013 manifesto, the party here made specific references to restricting the influence of Islam, promoting a policy of 'stopping the Islamisation of Europe – stopping the immigration from third countries (for example, from Africa and Asia)'. In 2017 the party changed its focus from asylum seekers to the more general 'migrants'. For these federal elections, FPÖ continued to emphasize its references to the symbolic dimension, particularly making reference to Austrians and Austrian culture, freedom, home(land) and, above all, Austrian citizens who are

in dire need of fairness. Interestingly, this fairness did not concern so much individuals but entire groups, as the party argues in its manifesto: ‘The individual person is constantly a part of a society, which too is a carrier of liberal rights – from the family to the people at large’.

If the case of AfD was a shift from focusing on the material dimension to focusing on the symbolic dimension, in the case of PVV in the Netherlands, the process was similar to that taking place with regard to FPÖ – an emphasis on both the material and symbolic dimensions, but shifting priorities towards the symbolic dimension over time. For the 2012 elections, the party paid relatively equal attention to the material and political dimensions. In the programme, entitled ‘Their Brussels, Our Netherlands’, Geert Wilders made it clear that the preservation of Dutch society calls for major restrictions to migrants’ and, above all, Muslims’ access to public goods. This preservation is needed, because, according to PVV ‘we have ceased to be masters at home... we are no longer able to determine our future, but are powerless spectators of un-Dutch policies, while EU nationalists party and enjoy perpetual lunches’ (2012: 11). Clearly, Wilders sees, similar to FPÖ, the EU as an elite project that favours non-Dutch people and, thus, the need to oppose this. In this respect, a clear distinction was drawn between Dutch and non-Dutch people in slogans such as ‘for them – the joys, for us – the burden’, which emphasized the party’s nativist and populist message. For the 2014 European Parliament elections, the party had a one-page manifesto spending no space on the material or political dimensions beyond a general call to ‘master our own borders’ as part of ‘choosing Netherlands’ instead of ‘the demands of the EU’. The party was more concerned with the symbolic dimension. In a paragraph called ‘Staying who we are’, the party declared: ‘we don’t want to become Eurabia; we want to stay who we are. We want to be free and sovereign’, drawing a distinction between the freedoms enjoyed in the Netherlands and an alleged concern that these freedoms would vanish if the social composition of the country changes and European integration deepens. This emphasis on the symbolic dimension was strengthened in the 2017 manifesto of the PVV. Here again, the party makes a clear distinction between Dutch liberal democracy and Islam. Particularly telling is the first and most comprehensive point made in the manifesto, which falls under the title ‘De-Islamise Netherlands’ and involves, among other things, curbing the religious freedoms of Muslims in the country. Additionally, the party emphasizes the need for direct democracy and leaving the EU as a political solution towards the declining influence of Dutch people. In contrast to the other two exclusionary parties examined here, the PVV’s populist discourse intensified over time, combined with a more distinctively nativist specification of ‘the people’.

In contrast to the focus on the symbolic dimension, it is the material dimension that is the main concern for the inclusionary populists in Europe’s South. This is particularly visible in SYRIZA’s emphasis on inclusion at the material level. With regard to the material dimension, ‘welfare’ and ‘rights’ are the words most commonly used, while building a modern, universal welfare state and an economy where worker control and participation in economic decisions are central priorities. A basic income for all, labour rights, universal public provision of health and education accessible to all and special provisions to extend such provision to vulnerable groups such as immigrants, older people, disabled people and poorer people feature prominently. In terms of the political dimension, less prominent but still significant in SYRIZA’s inclusionary populist discourse, the focus is on ‘democracy’ and ‘protest’. SYRIZA encourages protest and non-institutionalized forms of active citizen participation, most importantly in social movements as well as enhanced female participation. The symbolic dimension is the least prominent in SYRIZA’s manifestos. Mentions to ‘our people’ refers to the Greek people

but is constructed in a way that includes and mobilizes the key in-groups mentioned, which are workers, women, the unemployed, the young, immigrants and the poor. SYRIZA supported the establishment of laws to grant citizenship to second-generation migrants born in Greece. Populist references along all three dimensions of inclusion diminish proportionally over time, from their peak in the 2012 manifesto to the lowest point in the 2015 manifesto, released at a time when SYRIZA was expected to win government power. We found most references to all in-groups in the 2014 European elections manifesto, as well as a change of emphasis in in-groups mentioned between 2012 and 2015. In the 2015 manifesto it is only the workers, the poor and the pensioners who are mentioned.

In a similar vein to SYRIZA, Podemos' manifestos promote the inclusion of women and workers, the poor, immigrants, young people, disabled people, the unemployed as well as the evicted, seen as in-groups. 'Welfare' and 'rights' receive the highest counts in all three manifestos in relation to the material dimension, with the keywords 'equality', 'justice', 'universal' and 'solidarity' also appearing a considerable number of times. Podemos emphasizes the necessity to safeguard universal welfare rights encompassing in-groups, which is associated with the promotion of human rights. The national election manifestos, for instance, call for measures to guarantee universal access to education and health care, the right to work and the right to a taxation system that is fair for middle classes and workers. Explicit mention is made to the extension of universal health-care coverage to the immigrant population. With regard to the political dimension, 'participation' is by far the most mentioned keyword in national manifestos, followed by 'democracy' and 'representation'. National election manifestos propose cultural activities promoting the participation of immigrant, Roma or disabled people and women in public life, ensuring equality of opportunities for children and teenagers as well as worker participation in the management of large companies. In the case of immigrants, there is a clear argument in favour of improving their political rights by closing down detention centres, making it easier for migrants to acquire Spanish nationality, reinforcing family reunification and enfranchising settled foreign residents. Finally, in all three manifestos, keywords related to the symbolic dimension are less frequent than the material and political ones. Podemos' populism can thus be depicted as highly inclusionary. It advocates for the expansion of material and political rights to key in-groups, whereas the symbolic dimension of inclusionary populism is less explicit in the party discourse. Podemos' inclusionary populist references along all dimensions and in-groups also decrease over time in this period, but the change is much less pronounced than in the SYRIZA case.

In contrast to SYRIZA and Podemos, 5SM in Italy places the emphasis on the symbolic dimension, with little reference to the material and political dimensions. In its manifestoes, 5SM makes reference to broad notions of 'nation', community, persons, people, youth, Italians and representatives of the agricultural world. The only specific in-group identified is represented by young people. No direct mention is made of immigrants or marginalized people. In terms of the material dimension, both manifestos are very limited in their proposals. With the exception of a 'guaranteed unemployment benefit', redistributive issues are virtually absent. In terms of the political dimension, 5SM stresses direct web-based participation with references to the relevant 'consultation' procedures, meant to widen access and improve inclusion of a wider array of citizens. What is most prominent is reference to the symbolic dimension, where we encounter a fairly vague notion of who 'the people' are. The main identification of 'us' is Italy (18 times) and the 'nation' (14 times), while the notions of 'community', 'people' and 'citizens' are strongly associated with those who need to 'resist' against 'them' (European

Central Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, EU, other Italian parties, Germany, international financial actors, neoliberals). With respect to all the dimensions, the electoral manifestos demonstrate very limited signs of inclusion towards categories which go beyond ‘nationals’ and ‘Italians’. There is no indication that the category of ‘the people’ is meant to include anyone other than those who share the language – Italian – and who are therefore seen as citizens. In sum, 5SM’s manifestos portray a populist party without pronounced inclusionary (or for that matter exclusionary) traits.

DISCUSSION

A first observation is that not all of the populist parties we have examined are ‘equally’ populist when it comes to their public discourse as expressed through their electoral manifestos. The two ‘old’ parties, SYRIZA (25.8) and PVV (36.1), present the highest incidence of respectively inclusionary and exclusionary populist discourse over the period, Podemos (19.8) and FPÖ (34.7) follow, while AfD (28.6) and 5SM (14) present lower incidences. This finding refines our understanding of populism by showing that not only is being a populist a matter of degree (Aslanidis 2015: 92–93), but taking a position on inclusion/exclusion as a populist is a matter of degree as well (Paxton 2021). What is more, the degree of populism exhibited by the six parties varies over time. Four parties follow a trend of diminishing instances of inclusionary/exclusionary populist discourse (SYRIZA, Podemos, AfD and FPÖ), while for two parties (5SM and PVV) such references increase. The pattern of change over time for SYRIZA, Podemos, FPÖ (who could see the prospect of office after 2014) as well as PVV and 5SM (who couldn’t have been further from it) would attest to the idea that parties tone down their populist discourses once they start to see the prospect of office. This would not be the case for AfD, a party that was not considered a palatable coalition partner over this period and hence might have been expected to step up its exclusionary populist discourse.

Regarding out-groups/in-groups targeted, predictably, the parties from Northern Europe consider migrants, asylum seekers, foreigners and Muslims (or ‘Islam’) as out-groups to be expelled from welfare benefits, opportunities for political participation and cultural rights. On the contrary, in-groups such as children, families and the elderly (as well as members of the LGBTQ community in the case of PVV) are given pride of place in those whose well-deserved economic benefits and sense of cultural belonging must be protected. For their part, parties in the South (Podemos and SYRIZA), consider the workers, the poor, women, the young, unemployed, migrants as out-groups that the welfare state must be extended to include and the political and cultural community must embrace. 5SM sparsely mentions the young and the unemployed as in-groups. References to in-groups and out-groups can be considered part of a populist electoral strategy aimed at building coalitions between disaffected groups whose support they elicit. Populists name particular social groups in the context of their narratives of inclusion/exclusion in order to attract voters belonging to those groups who do not feel represented by mainstream parties, or in order to attract voters who feel threatened by the groups mentioned. The former is evident in the cases of SYRIZA and Podemos who mention several in-groups they strive to include in the welfare state. The latter is clear in FPÖ’s reference to Muslims and Islam, which not only pits Muslims against Austrians but also, for example, includes the Austrian Serb community in its ranks, presenting this as an alliance with a common cultural enemy (Hafèz 2014).

Interestingly, over time, there are some notable changes in the social groups mentioned. Reference to specific in-groups diminish drastically over time in the manifestos of SYRIZA. In its 2015 manifesto SYRIZA only refers to workers, the poor and pensioners, while the only group referred to more frequently in 2015 than in 2012 is pensioners. Podemos' references to in-groups overall remains fairly constant but references to the poor and the evicted become more frequent in the 2016 election manifesto. AfD's references to migrants, Muslims, Islam, asylum seekers, refugees, criminals and foreigners significantly increase. In the case of PVV, migrants, Muslims, Islam, criminals and asylum seekers are increasingly emphasized but foreigners are mentioned less over time. FPÖ's references to the same groups decrease over time. The decreasing reference to social groups noted in the discourses of SYRIZA and FPÖ may reflect these parties' shift from a 'niche' to a catch-all electoral strategy, whose appeal to particular groups becomes less pronounced, the aim being to not alienate *any* group. A similar logic pervades 5SM's consistently sparse mention of specific (in- or out-)groups. The changes in the emphasis placed on particular groups seen in the manifestos of Podemos and PVV may reflect changing electoral appeals to specific groups that these parties aim to represent (i.e. the evicted in Spain, non-Muslim migrants in the Netherlands).

In terms of which dimension is most predominant in the six populisms examined, as can clearly be seen in Table 34.1, over the 2012–2017 period, SYRIZA and Podemos, both inclusionary populist parties from the South, predominantly stress the material dimension, while PVV and FPÖ, both exclusionary populist parties from the North, stress predominantly the symbolic dimension. This seems to chime with the expectation that inclusionary populism tends to be material, while exclusionary populism tends to be cultural. However, the remaining two parties do not present such a clear picture. 5SM, a party that cannot be classified either as inclusionary or exclusionary with confidence, seems to be stressing both the political dimension and the symbolic dimension at the expense of the material dimension. AfD stresses both the material and the symbolic dimensions at the expense of the political dimension.

Over time, SYRIZA/Podemos and PVV/FPÖ consistently focus on the material and symbolic dimensions, respectively, while 5SM focuses increasingly on the symbolic dimension and AfD moves from emphasizing the material towards the symbolic dimension. What this tells us is that populist parties across Europe can and do change their focus on particular dimensions over time. This may be because populist parties strategically choose to compete along a different dimension in the context of the particular party system (or election) within which they are embedded. For instance, when economic issues are prevalent in an electoral campaign, an exclusionary populist who focuses on symbolic matters may be forced to compete on economic matters, along the left–right or investment–consumption dimension (Beramendi et al. 2015); conversely, when 'cultural' issues are on the agenda, inclusionary populists may be compelled to highlight their positions on immigration, minorities, LGBT issues, etc., along the liberal–authoritarian dimension (Kitschelt 1994). In this instance, the possibility could be explored that AfD may have shifted its focus from the material to the symbolic dimension as a result of the prevalence of the Syrian refugee crisis in the German 2017 pre-electoral debate. On its part, 5SM, a party that did not provide strong inclusionary (or exclusionary) signals, stressed the symbolic dimension (largely focusing on anti-establishment and anti-corruption messages), because in an election dominated by Europe and economic issues (Di Virgilio et al. 2015) this approach gave the party an advantage.

In summary, our research has identified significant variation in the degree to which populist discourses are deployed across cases and over time in both Europe's North and South, with

Table 34.1 Share of keywords in election manifestos (dimensions)

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	Average
Populists from Southern Europe							
SYRIZA							
Material	21.4		11.1	4.9			
Political	11.7		12	4.5			
Symbolic	6.1		3.8	1.9			
Total	39.3		26.9	11.3			25.8
5SM							
Material		1.6	1.2				
Political		6.4	2.2				
Symbolic		4.8	11.8				
Total		12.8	15.2				14
Podemos							
Material			16.8	10.9	10.8		
Political			6.6	4.8	4.8		
Symbolic			2.4	1.2	1.2		
Total			25.7	16.9	16.9		19.8
Populists from Northern Europe							
AfD							
Material		10.7	5.0			1.6	
Political		9.5	3.2			1.2	
Symbolic		8.4	3.5			5.3	
Total		28.6	11.7			8.1	16.1
FPÖ							
Material		11.3	12.7			6.2	
Political		4.3	6.8			3.4	
Symbolic		19.1	29.2			13.2	
Total		34.7	48.7			22.9	35.4
PVV							
Material	1.5		0.0			5.2	
Political	1.0		0.0			10.3	
Symbolic	4.2		15.2			20.6	
Total	6.7		15.2			36.1	19.3

Note: Each of the share of keywords in election manifestos has been multiplied by 1000.

Source: Parties' manifestos, Font et al. (2021).

populist references to inclusion/exclusion diminishing the closer the populist contender is to government or participation in a government coalition. References to out-groups/in-groups are part of populist parties' 'niche' electoral strategies and they also tend to diminish once populists assess that office is in their grasp, when there is a turn to 'catch-all' strategies whose aim is not to alienate specific groups of voters. Importantly, we can confirm that both Northern exclusionary and Southern inclusionary populist parties stress different combinations of both

the material and the symbolic dimensions of exclusion/inclusion and this emphasis shifts over time, according to the dominant issues that define party competition.

CONCLUSIONS

The new globalization cleavage and economic explanations predict a clear-cut North–South divide of European populism types, with exclusionary populisms dominating the North and inclusionary populisms dominating the South. Our research has not questioned the broader pattern, but it has uncovered a diverse and moving landscape of populisms that is potentially more malleable than what dominant explanations would expect. Focusing on the way in which populist political agency navigates national party systems (Bornschier 2018), we have argued that populist parties are able to compete along different political dimensions and change the groups they target for inclusion/exclusion. This demonstrates the strategic adaptability of populist discourses and lends support to the idea that the success of exclusionary and inclusionary forms of populism cannot be approached on grounds of regional ‘geographical determinism’ (Roberts 2019), but rather rests on particular configurations of the national social and political context (Lisi et al. 2019).

From this perspective, we may be able to make better sense of the ‘exceptions’ of successful inclusionary populist parties in the North and exclusionary parties in the South, before and after the economic crisis, including the recent successes of France Insoumise in the North (Ciocchetti 2019) and parties such as Vox (Spain), Chega (Portugal) and Fratelli d’Italia (Italy) (Baldini et al. 2023; Mendes and Dennison 2021) in the South. Independent Greeks emerged at the height of the economic crisis in Greece, prioritizing a clear exclusionary populist discourse targeting foreigners, with an emphasis on the symbolic dimension. France Insoumise’s inclusionary populist discourse in the campaign for the 2017 presidential elections embraced both welfare expansion and multi-culturalism in a political contest that focused on both economic retrenchment and heightened tensions on the question of the inclusion of citizens of foreign origin and migrants in France. Insofar as these ‘exceptions’ are increasingly on the rise in European party politics, it is possible that the sharp North–South divide in European populisms established in the literature is transient, rather than fixed. Further research that incorporates populist political strategy in terms of inclusion/exclusion in our explanations of populist-type success in Europe is pertinent and must complement demand-side economic explanations.

Beyond their relevance for the way we approach the geography of European populisms, our findings contribute to the study of European populist parties’ electoral and more broadly political strategies. First, we have not only confirmed the expectation that populists of both the inclusionary and exclusionary type will moderate their populist discourse once they see the prospect of government, but we have also provided insights on how this process of moderation takes place. Moving towards the mainstream entails moderating positions on inclusion/exclusion as well as weaker targeting of particular out-groups/in-groups. Second, the finding that Southern inclusionary populisms do not always mainly focus on the material dimension and that Northern exclusionary populisms do not always mainly focus on the symbolic dimension, as well as the finding that they may ‘switch’ dimensions over time, is in the same direction as recent research showing that exclusionary populists do compete on the material dimension (Jessoula et al. 2021), while inclusionary populists are not necessarily more inclined than

exclusionary populists to do so (Bernhard and Kriesi 2019). Finally, we make a contribution to the emerging literature on European populist policy. The finding that populist parties strategically target different out-groups over time may contribute to the explanation of policy shifts, such as the emergence of homonationalist discourses in parties such as the Rassemblement Nationale and the Sweden Democrats (Möser and Reimers 2022). More comparative research across the North/South divide is clearly needed to confirm these patterns.

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35. Central and Eastern Europe

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INTRODUCTION

Populism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is a topic that has attracted growing interest in international scholarship. A common starting point for analyses of populism in CEE today is a recognition of the distinct temporality of populism as a phenomenon emerging from within the horizon of post-1989 transformation processes in the region. Against this background, numerous lines of inquiry have prominently crystallized in the area-specific literature, such as the role of populism in ‘democratic backsliding’ (Cianetti et al. 2018; Smilov and Krastev 2008), the predominantly ‘centrist’ or ‘radical’ character of CEE populisms (Stanley 2017; Učeň 2007) or ‘generational’ varieties of populist electoral politics (Gyárfásová 2018; Pop-Eleches 2010). In providing an overview of these research debates, this chapter proposes its own angle on these issues by drawing on comprehensive recent work on populism in the party systems of the Visegrád Four (V4) countries since 1989 (Kim 2022), based on a discursive approach that understands populism as a political logic centred on the construction of a popular underdog in antagonistic demarcation against a power bloc (Laclau 2005).¹ In keeping with the overall aim of this *Research Handbook*, this chapter seeks to strike a balance between broad overviews of region-wide phenomena and patterns on the one hand and a critical perspective on populism grounded in conceptual rigour, case knowledge and context-sensitive analysis on the other. The chapter proceeds in three main steps: first, a brief overview of notable historical examples of populism and constructions of ‘the popular’ in CEE before 1989; second, a condensed overview of the main lines of inquiry that have emerged in the growing scholarship on populism in post-1989 CEE; and third, a summary of findings from more in-depth work on populism in the V4 countries since 1989. The conclusion provides a brief outlook with potential avenues for future research.

POPULISM IN CEE BEFORE 1989: AN OVERVIEW

CEE is a region with a rich history of political movements from the late nineteenth century onwards for which appeals to ‘the popular’ played a prominent role: from *narodnichestvo* in the Russian Empire and *lidovláda* in the Czech lands to the ‘popular writers’ (*népi írók*) of interwar Hungary. Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk’s concept of *lidovláda* (‘popular rule’), which is sometimes translated as ‘populism’ (Skilling 1994), constitutes a notable early example of populist political thought, advocating an understanding of democracy as rule by the broadest mass of common ‘people’ in demarcation from Marxist class struggle, bourgeois-liberal conceptions of limited democracy and the oppressive system of ‘theocratic autocracy’ under Austro-Hungarian rule (e.g. Masaryk 1908). Masaryk thus stood for an anti-monarchist humanist populism that inscribed an understanding of the sovereign people-as-underdog into a democratic national imaginary of independence from the dual monarchy as part of a move-

ment toward emancipation of all humanity from ‘theocratic autocracy’. Other movements in the wider region tended to inscribe their notions of ‘the people’ around more specific appeals to agrarian and peasant identity as the true locus of the popular – most notably with the Russian *narodniki* and the ‘Going to the people’ (*khozhdienie v narod*) movement, whereby revolutionary-minded students and intellectuals engaged in a performative practice of moving from the cities to the countryside to live and work alongside ‘the people’, or the ‘popular writers’ movement in post-1920 Hungary, which appealed to the Hungarian peasantry as the true source of national and popular identity against the perceived dominance of ‘aristocratic Hungary’ under the regency of Miklós Horthy (e.g. Fėja 1990).

What can be seen in these examples is a characteristic tension between a populist appeal to a broadly conceived popular underdog on the one hand and a class reductionism of inscribing this popular identity into a differentially delimited socio-structural category (e.g. the peasantry) as well as a national imaginary that understands ‘the people’ as identical with ‘the nation’ in the context of competing projects of nation-building on the other hand. In some cases, such as the Endecja in turn-of-the-century Congress Poland, this tension was visible at the level of questions surrounding the movement’s direction: in what has been referred to as the ‘romantic populism’ of Jan Ludwik Popławski, the Endecja thinker defined ‘the people’ in wide-ranging terms as ‘the entirety of working strata in the widest sense of this term’ (Popławski 1900) – encompassing the peasantry, industrial workers and the intelligentsia alike, collectively defined by their subordinate social positioning – whereas the thinking of his friend and co-ideologue Roman Dmowski increasingly evolved toward an emphasis on people-as-nation over people-as-underdog (Porter 2000).

With the establishment of the Soviet Union and subsequently of state-socialist satellite regimes in the aftermath of the Second World War, references to ‘the people’ or ‘the working people’ became central to the *langue de bois* of official ruling-party rhetoric everywhere, while also establishing a terrain from which oppositional discourses could emerge in some contexts around a reclamation of ‘the people’ as the unredeemed subject of one-party rule. This could be seen in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, in which Imre Nagy declared the uprising to be a ‘national democratic movement encompassing and linking into one our entire people’ against ‘the one-party system’ (radio speech, 25 October 1956), or the Polish October of 1956, in which Władysław Gomułka declared a ‘new path of socialism’ built on more democracy and worker participation ‘in the running of the popular state’ (speech on Parade Square in Warsaw, 24 October 1956). In this manner, brief flashes of a democratizing populism invoking an unfulfilled popular subject against an oppressive regime or a flawed past came to the fore in the context of projects of reforming state socialism from within. In both cases, however, the unfulfilled nature of the promises of 1956 – despite the best efforts to co-opt or channel them in watered-down form under Kádárite ‘goulash communism’ and the ‘Gomułka thaw’, respectively – provided reference points for key moments in 1980s democratization processes such as the Lakitelek meeting or the ‘21 demands’ of the Solidarność trade union, which reinvoked the unredeemed strivings of ‘the nation’ or ‘the workers’, respectively. In the case of the project of ‘socialism with a human face’ in Czechoslovakia, by contrast, the main discursive thrust was not so much the antagonistic construction of ‘people’ versus regime, but rather the differential expansion of liberalizing signifiers such as ‘freedom’ into domains such as human rights and the economy. The strategy of subsequent oppositional movements such as Charta 77 in Czechoslovakia and the Helsinki Groups in the Soviet Union was geared toward occupying this terrain of dislocated promises of ever more ‘freedoms’ as inscribed in the official com-

mitments and constitutions of one-party state-socialist regimes. Against this background, the question for the post-1989 context would be to what extent populist invocations of ‘the people’ would (re-)emerge as a category of political struggles in different contexts of post-socialist transformation and multi-party competition.

POPULISM IN CEE AFTER 1989: TAKING STOCK OF THE FIELD

The CEE region and, in particular, the V4 countries have become something of a *locus classicus* for theories of populism that understand populism as an exclusively anti-democratic phenomenon. These include the work of Jan-Werner Müller (2016), who defines populism as a moralistic, anti-pluralist claim to exclusively represent ‘the people’ and, as such, a distinctly authoritarian approach to constitutionalism, with Fidesz in Hungary being a paradigmatic case (Müller 2017). Gábor Halmai (2019) and Wojciech Sadurski (2019) likewise develop understandings of populism as an authoritarian phenomenon based on their analyses of the constitutional politics of Fidesz and Law and Justice (PiS) in government, respectively. On a conceptual level, a limitation of this strand of scholarship arguably consists in reducing populism to something close to a synonym for authoritarianism *tout court*: an exclusive claim to represent is a defining feature of every authoritarianism, while most authoritarianisms today also pay some form of lip service to a morally righteous ‘people’ as the subject that is supposed to be represented. Even based on less narrow understandings of populism, however, a growing number of empirical analyses have explained ‘democratic backsliding’ in the V4 countries in particular as an outcome of populist party strategies with varying accents: nationalist or national-conservative in Hungary (Fidesz) and Poland (PiS), and business-firm or technocratic in Czechia (ANO) and Slovakia (Smer) (Bakke and Sitter 2020; Enyedi 2016; Hanley and Vachudova 2018).

On the basis of experiences up to the late 2000s, Daniel Smilov and Ivan Krastev (2008) proposed a distinction between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ populism, with the former posing a threat to the institutions and principles of liberal democracy (the authors’ main examples being PiS, Samoobrona and League of Polish Families (LPR) in Poland) and the latter mainly challenging the established party system (the examples here being GERB in Bulgaria, Fidesz in Hungary pre-2010 and Smer in Slovakia). It is questionable, however, to what extent these parties can all be considered populist based on rigorous case-specific analysis and, just as important, to what extent even the authoritarian practices of ‘hard populist’ parties are actually attributable to their populism, as opposed to other aspects of their politics. It has been argued (Kim 2021), for instance, that the authoritarianism of Fidesz and PiS in power has been articulated in populist terms only to a limited extent, even when preceded by more strongly populist phases in these parties’ discourses in opposition (Fidesz 2006–2009, PiS 2007–2014). Rather, the authoritarian ruling practices of both parties find expression primarily in nationalist claims to exclusively represent ‘the nation’ against supposedly ‘foreign’ or anti-‘national’ elements, while populist constructions of hidden sources of power additionally come to the fore in justifying authoritarian practices in conjunction with anti-liberalism and nationalism in specific phases (e.g. ‘the networks’ for PiS 2005–2007, ‘Soros’ for Fidesz 2017–2018).

In a related vein to the hard/soft distinction, Ben Stanley (2017) draws a distinction between ‘centrist’ and ‘radical’ populism in summarizing a key strand of scholarly debate on populism in post-1989 CEE. The theory of centrist populism views populist phenomena in the region

primarily as a reaction to ‘corrupt and incompetent leaders, rather than rejecting the politics of transition’ (the author’s examples include the National Movement of Simeon II in Bulgaria, Public Affairs in Czechia, Res Publica in Estonia and Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OL’ANO) in Slovakia), whereas the theory of radical populism points to a ‘backlash against the liberal politics of post-communist transition and the elites responsible’ (examples here include Fidesz and Jobbik in Hungary, PiS, Samoobrona and LPR in Poland, the Greater Romania Party in Romania, Smer and the Slovak National Party in Slovakia)² (Stanley 2017: 140). To be sure, this distinction is not coterminous with that of hard/soft or indeed authoritarian/democratic populism as understood in the aforementioned literature, with ANO in Czechia, for example, constituting an oft-cited case of centrist populism and of democratic backsliding alike.

The notion of centrist populism as the predominant type of populism in CEE was advanced by Peter Učeň (2007), who emphasized the ideological eclecticism or diffuseness of anti-establishment politics in the region, as well as Hanspeter Kriesi (2014), who argued that populism in CEE is an ideologically diffuse product of a lack of party-system institutionalization (in contrast to Western Europe, where populism is held to be a result of the erosion of the representative function of established parties). This line of argument shares affinities with Allan Sikk’s (2012) concept of ‘newness’ as a successful strategy in CEE of parties with ‘low ideological motivation’, which have policies generally similar to those of established parties while demarcating themselves vis-à-vis the latter with reference to their newcomer status. As will be discussed in the next section, a characteristic feature of centrist populism is indeed a distinctly generational claim to represent ‘the people’ against established forces of both ‘left’ and ‘right’ alleged to have merely taken turns in power, yet this claim is far from unique to centrist populism and can indeed be found in numerous paradigmatic cases of ‘radical populism’ such as Jobbik or Samoobrona. As such, the centrist/radical distinction, while certainly shedding light on important aspects of populist dynamics in the region, is an unstable one at best, given that these characteristics often go hand in hand and populist strategies centred on claims to ‘newness’ are likewise deployed by parties that openly flaunt their radicalism and can hardly be ascribed a ‘low ideological motivation’.

Related to this discussion is the question of the generational temporality or cyclicity of populist politics in CEE. Stanley (2017) argues in conjunction with his centrist/radical distinction that centrist populism is a marginal phenomenon in the 1990s but takes centre stage beginning in the 2000s in the context of growing voter disaffection with established parties, while radical populism remains prominent in both decades but with an emergence of new actors in the 2000s, including the conversion of previously mainstream parties into radical populist ones (e.g. Fidesz, PiS). In a similar vein, Grigore Pop-Eleches (2010) had already argued at the turn of the latter decade that ‘third-generation elections’, which take place after two different party blocs (usually of the centre-left and centre-right) have taken turns governing since the fall of state socialism, open up heightened opportunities for ‘unorthodox parties’ (including populist ones) that claim to represent an alternative to established parties held to be equally corrupt and to have merely alternated in power. From this perspective, there should come a point in the late 1990s or early 2000s in most CEE countries where populism not only starts occurring more frequently, but also takes on a distinctly generational character, centred on the rejection of established parties in favour of purportedly new, untainted outsiders; whether such claims take on a ‘centrist’ or ‘radical’ character, as already noted, is indeterminate and a question for context-specific analysis. This latter point is accentuated by Oľga Gyárfášová’s (2018)

distinction between the ‘anti-establishment’ OĽaNO and the ‘anti-system’ People’s Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS) as ‘fourth-generation’ phenomena in the Slovak context. While both parties emerged from a context in which a third (Smer-led) party bloc had gone into government and created openings for a new generation of forces claiming to oppose the establishment, these two parties are radically different phenomena, with OĽaNO corresponding to the mould of an ideologically diffuse populism directed against established parties, while ĽSNS constitutes a striking case of an openly neofascist party (and arguably the most successful in all of Europe in the second half of the 2010s). These and related questions raised throughout this section – pertaining to the democratic or authoritarian, centrist or radical and generationally distinctive character of populism – will be explored in more depth in the next section, on the basis of a systematic examination of V4 populisms between 1989 and 2020.

POPULISM IN THE V4 AFTER 1989

The following is a condensed summary of an in-depth examination of populism in the V4 party systems (Kim 2022), encompassing the first 30 years of multi-party competition after the fall of state socialism (up to and including the February 2020 parliamentary election in Slovakia).³ This research draws on the conceptual toolkit of a discursive approach to populism and post-foundational discourse analysis (logics of difference and equivalence, antagonistic frontiers, nodal points, empty signifiers) to trace how the popular subject is constructed in populist discourses in the context of hegemonic struggles over the construction of post-1989 order. On this basis, the analysis develops a periodization of populist discourses in the V4 in terms of discursive (e.g. centrist, conservative, left wing, liberal, nationalist, nativist) and hegemonic type (e.g. authoritarian hegemonic, generational counterhegemonic), spanning four generations since 1989. The results are summarized in Table 35.1 and elaborated in the remainder of the section.

The starting point for the analysis is the imagined break of 1989/1990, which has different names in the four countries – ‘November 1989’ (Czechia and Slovakia), ‘the system change’ (Hungary), ‘the victory of Solidarity’ (Poland) – and marks the founding moment of a post-1989 imaginary that crystallizes in the discursive terrain of party competition in different ways. In Czechia, a relatively stabilized ‘post-November’ hegemonic formation emerges whereby competing party discourses articulate largely differential and non-antagonistic left/right variations on the founding promises of ‘post-November’ order, whereas deeply divided imaginaries emerge in the other countries whereby party discourses cluster around opposing constructions of post-1989 reality as the realization of ethno-national redemption for the community of ‘Hungarianhood’ versus the state of ‘Hungary’, the continuation of the legacy of ‘Solidarity’ versus opposition to the forces of ‘liberalism’ in Poland, or support for versus opposition to Vladimír Mečiar’s nation-building project in Slovakia. In this context, populism in the V4 countries initially emerges in one of three main guises in the 1990s: as part of discourses that either (1) situate themselves outside the post-1989 imaginary (SPR-RSČ in Czechia, MIÉP in Hungary); (2) situate themselves on the ethno-nationalist side of the main divide within the post-1989 imaginary (Fidesz in Hungary, HZDS in Slovakia); or (3) try to displace the main divide within the post-1989 imaginary in populist terms (UP in Poland).

The first cluster is exemplified by the Czech Republicans construction of a power bloc of ‘communists and their cooperators’ who allegedly staged the events of November 1989 from

Table 35.1 Periodization of populist discourses in the V4 countries

Time frame (country)	Party	Discursive type
1990–1992 (CZ)	Republicans (SPR-RSČ)	Anti-communist nationalist populism
1991–2002 (SK)	HZDS	<i>Populist nationalism</i>
1993, 1997–2000 (PL)	Union of Labour (UP)	Anti-liberal left-wing populism
1993–2001 (PL)	<i>Samoobrona (SRP)</i>	<i>Populist nationalism</i>
1994–2002 (HU)	MIÉP	<i>Populist nationalism</i>
1997, 2002–2004 (HU)	Fidesz	<i>Populist nationalism</i>
1999–2002 (SK)	Smer	Centrist populism
2001–2005 (PL)	Samoobrona (SRP)	Anti-liberal nationalist and social populism
2001–2007 (PL)	Law and Justice (PiS)	Anti-liberal nationalist populism
2002 (SK)	HZDS	Centrist populism
2003–present (HU)	Jobbik	<i>Populist nationalism</i>
2006–2009 (HU)	Fidesz	National-conservative social populism
2007–2014, 2019 (PL)	Law and Justice (PiS)	Anti-liberal nationalist and social populism
2010 (CZ)	Public Affairs (VV)	Centrist populism
2010, 2014, 2017–2018 (HU)	Jobbik	Nationalist populism
2010–2011 (PL)	Palikot's Movement (RP)	Anti-clerical liberal populism
2011–2013 (CZ)	ANO	Centrist entrepreneur populism
2012–present (SK)	OLaNO	Conservative anti-party populism
2013 (CZ)	Dawn	Neoliberal nativist populism
2013, 2017 (CZ)	Czech Pirate Party	Liberal populism
2014–present (CZ)	ANO	Centrist populism of 'hard work' in power
2014–2018 (HU)	Fidesz	<i>Illiberal populist nationalism in power</i>
2015 (PL)	Kukiz'15	Nationalist anti-party populism
2016–present (SK)	Sme Rodina	Nativist entrepreneur populism
2016–present (SK)	ESNS	<i>Populist nationalism</i>
2017 (CZ)	SPD	Neoconservative nativist populism
2018 (HU)	Dialogue-MSZP	Left-wing populism

Note: CZ = Czechia; HU = Hungary; PL = Poland; SK = Slovakia. Discourses in which populism constitutes a secondary feature are in italic.

Source: Kim (2022: 281), reused with permission.

above in order to remain in power under a different guise; MIÉP in Hungary, while similarly claiming that the 'nomenklatura' has remained in power, also inscribes itself within the horizon of the 'system change' by radicalizing the promise of ethno-national redemption already present in prime minister József Antall's inaugural promise to represent a community of '15 million Hungarians'. MIÉP's populist nationalism thus straddles the first and the second clusters: whereas the former claims that 1989/1990 was a non-event and a sham, the latter claims to carry through the 'true' promises of 1989/1990 – by taking up, in the Hungarian context, the cause of national redemption for an ethnically defined community. Fidesz (post-1994) and Mečiar's HZDS firmly situate themselves within this second cluster, with populism taking on the function of a secondary element within a primarily nationalist discourse pitting a national subject against 'foreign' powers and/or a 'foreign'-minded domestic 'elite'. The third cluster, finally, consists of the Polish UP, which situates itself neither along the main divide within the post-1989 imaginary nor outside the latter altogether, but rather seeks to displace this divide in the populist terms of 'ordinary people' versus a power bloc of 'elites' and 'liberals' straddling the post-'Solidarity' versus anti-'liberalism' divide.⁴

It is this third cluster that, although rare in the 1990s, prefigures a widespread pattern that establishes itself from the turn of the millennium onwards: namely, the concentrated emergence of post-2000 populisms that displace the terms of party competition onto a divide pitting the ‘people’ against a power bloc of forces alleged to have merely taken turns in government since 1989. The entire post-2010 spectrum of populisms in Czechia (VV, ANO, Dawn/SPD, Pirates), the nationalist populism in Jobbik’s election campaigns in Hungary, all of the non-PiS populisms in Poland after 2000 (SRP, RP, Kukiz’15) and all of the non-HZDS populisms in Slovakia (Smer, OĽaNO, Sme Rodina and the primarily nationalist ĽSNS) fit this mould. As much as these discourses vary in their constructions of the popular subject, what they have in common is the idea that a privileged class of ‘politicians’, ‘parties’ or ‘political dinosaurs’ has remained continuously in power and is ultimately in league with each other – in spite of the ostensible divisions among them – against the wider ‘people’. As such, all of these populist discourses rely on a self-positioning as newcomers and outsiders in demarcation against a power bloc of established forces held to be collectively compromised by having been in power for too long. These populisms thus broadly follow a *generational counterhegemonic* logic in claiming not only that the established terms of party competition are a sham (and that the real divide is people versus power), but also that a ‘change of generation’ and the entry of ‘new people’ into politics is needed in order to sweep away the old power bloc and various associated ills such as corruption and mismanagement of the state. Generational counterhegemonic populism corresponds to Pop-Eleches’ (2010) ‘third-generation’ logic of displacing the established terms of party competition with the allegation that those who alternated in power in the first two election cycles after 1989 constitute a monolithic, equally corrupt power bloc. In contrast, for example, the anti-‘November’ populism of the Czech Republicans corresponds to a distinctly ‘first-generation’ logic of ascribing a fundamental continuity between the Civic Forum-led government and its immediate communist predecessor and, indeed, articulating the demand for immediate early elections as the only means of bringing about a true break with the old regime. The other instances of populism in the 1990s, for their part – MIÉP and Fidesz in Hungary, UP in Poland, HZDS in Slovakia – point to a ‘second-generation’ dynamic whereby all of these parties, in some way or another, try to radicalize or incorporate the founding promises of inaugural post-1989 governments (MDF in Hungary, Solidarity in Poland, VPN in Slovakia), while also tracing their own roots back to these first-generation anti-regime movements and, indeed, laying claim to the true legacy of the latter without articulating the people versus power opposition in the generational counterhegemonic terms of new, untainted outsiders versus equally corrupt established forces.

The multiplication of generational counterhegemonic populisms in the V4 countries from 2000 onwards therefore broadly corresponds to a shift from a second- to a third-generation logic of frontier displacement, albeit with considerable variation in the specific timing across countries. Only in Slovakia does the first third-generation election see the rise of generational counterhegemonic populism (Smer in 2002); in the other V4 countries, the latter only comes with the second third-generation election of 2001 (SRP in Poland) or, after a considerable delay, with the 2010 elections (VV in Czechia, Jobbik in Hungary). In both Czechia and Hungary, it takes large-scale dislocations in institutional stability between the 2006 and 2010 elections for an electorally relevant generational populist discourse to emerge, whereas in Poland, the third-generation character of the 2001 elections is arguably magnified by the spectacular disintegration of the Solidarity Electoral Action toward the end of its term in government. Indeed, the SRP makes its breakthrough in 2001 with a generational populist discourse constructing

the entire spectrum of post-‘Solidarity’ and anti-‘liberal’ forces as responsible for corruption and the ‘selling off’ of the nation to ‘foreign capital’. In each country, the emergence of generational counterhegemonic populism can thus be situated in the context of specific dislocations: from the erosion of ‘post-November’ hegemonic stability after the 2006 elections (Czechia, 2006/2010) or the scandal and public unrest in the wake of ‘the Őszöd speech’ (Hungary, 2006) to the implosion of the post-Solidarity coalition (Poland, 2000/2001) or a Dzurinda government held to be equally corrupt and infighting-ridden as Mečiar’s (Slovakia, 1998/2002). Following Gyárfášová (2018), OĽaNO, Sme Rodina and ĽSNS can be understood in turn as ‘fourth-generation’ phenomena in a Slovak context in which a third (Smer-led) bloc since 1989 has had an extended run in government (2006–2010, 2012–2020). The discourses of OĽaNO, Sme Rodina and ĽSNS take up specific dislocations in the ‘social state’ discourse of Smer, from allegations of rampant corruption and oligarchization to social issues such as ‘debt amnesty’, while constructing in various ways a Smer-led power bloc of post-1989 ‘politicians’ and thus situating Smer as the representative of a corrupt oligarchy that it itself once opposed. In a similar vein, the concept of a fourth generation can be applied to the populist discourses of Palikot’s Movement (2010–2011) and Kukiz’15 (2015) in Poland, both of which emerge in a context in which a third (PiS-led) bloc has already governed (2005–2007) and, in the process, reshuffled the terms of party competition into a ‘solidaristic’ versus ‘liberal’ or PiS versus PO bipolarity, which the populisms of RP and Kukiz’15 alike seek to displace as part of their professed opposition to the entire post-1989 class of ‘politicians’ or ‘the same elites’.

In this context, Fidesz in Hungary and PiS in Poland constitute two important exceptions to the trend toward generational counterhegemonic populism in the V4 countries after 2000. Up to 2004, Fidesz’s populist nationalism constitutes a second-generation phenomenon that seeks to co-opt the ethno-national imaginary of the ‘system change’ from the MDF, interpellating the ‘homeland’ against a ‘foreign’-like MSZP-SZDSZ government – a discourse that culminates with the 2004 referendum on granting citizenship to ethnic Hungarians abroad. If Fidesz reinvents itself from a liberal party to a nationalist one after 1994, it arguably reinvents itself a second time with its social-populist turn in the mid-2000s: indeed, it is during this phase (2006–2009) that Viktor Orbán interpellates ‘the people’ (against ‘the aristocracy’) as a category above and beyond ‘the parties’ and transcending ‘left’ versus ‘right’ divisions – in contrast to his earlier construction of ‘the homeland’ (against a ‘foreign’-like government) as the exclusive terrain of ‘our parties’ in the 2002 post-election context. In this sense, Fidesz’s 2006–2009 populism, while not following a generational logic of new, untainted outsiders versus equally corrupt establishment, reshuffles the divided post-1989 imaginary of ‘Hungarianhood’ versus ‘Hungary’ in terms of a new frontier construction (‘new majority’ versus ‘new aristocracy’) and thus serves as an instituting moment for a hegemonic reordering that ensues with the declaration of the ‘System of National Cooperation’ (NER) after the 2010 Fidesz landslide.

PiS, in contrast to Fidesz, emerges only in 2001 as a newcomer party featuring a populist discourse from its very founding, albeit not a generational one: the Kaczyński brothers had long been prominent figures in various post-Solidarity formations and, indeed, positively invoked their backgrounds in the Solidarity union and ‘the Solidarity camp’. Nonetheless, PiS’s discourse inaugurates a break in the post-1989 imaginary during the party’s first term in government (2005–2007) by constructing an unholy alliance between the ‘networks’ and ‘liberal’ traitors of ‘the Solidarity camp’, thus displacing the post-‘Solidarity’ versus anti-‘liberalism’ divide that had crystallized in the Polish party system of the 1990s and offering an

anti-liberal populist explanation for the alleged failure of all previous governments of ‘the Solidarity camp’ to root out the ‘networks’ protecting their privileges. PiS’s project of frontier displacement continues in opposition (2007–2014) with the articulation of a ‘solidaristic Poland’ versus ‘liberal Poland’ divide in the social-populist terms of the common good of all versus entrenched structures of privilege. PiS’s populism, though not generational, thus establishes a new division in the post-1989 discursive terrain and displaces the earlier post-‘Solidarity’ versus anti-‘liberalism’ divide within which its own (second-generation) predecessor formation, the Centre Alliance (PC), had firmly situated itself.

In contrast to the post-2000 trend toward various forms of generational counterhegemonic populism, Fidesz and PiS deploy populism as part of projects of establishing *authoritarian hegemony*. The NER is founded on the authoritarian institutionalist notion that Fidesz, having previously positioned itself against the outgoing government in the social-populist (but not authoritarian) terms of ‘new majority’ versus ‘new aristocracy’, can now proceed to occupy a ‘central field of power’ and represent ‘the national concerns... in their naturalness’, as Orbán put it in a 2009 speech, thus pointing to an exclusive and totalizing claim to the ‘nation’ (but no longer a populist one insofar as the antagonistic gap vis-à-vis ‘power’ now disappears). PiS’s operation of displacing the established divide in the post-1989 imaginary by constructing a ‘networks’-‘liberals’ conspiracy goes hand in hand with an authoritarian logic of denying the legitimacy of the main parliamentary opposition and justifying the ruling party’s attempts to remake the state in its own image. It is worth noting that populism is hardly present in PiS’s post-2015 ruling discourse and only emerges in certain moments in Fidesz’s post-2010 counterpart, making its appearance in conjunction with nationalism as a reinstating moment that makes the antagonistic constitution of these hegemonic constellations explicit by (re)defining the terrain of the ‘nation’ against the likes of ‘Soros’ or the system of ‘late post-communism’ (and thereby also retroactively justifying the authoritarian expansion of ruling-party control over institutions). The authoritarian hegemony projects of Fidesz and PiS, in turn, inaugurate fourth-generation contexts of party competition in Hungary and Poland, in which other populist discourses constitute themselves in opposition to either the NER (Jobbik and Dialogue-MSZP in Hungary) or the PiS versus PO bipolarity (RP and Kukiz’15 in Poland). The left-wing populism of Dialogue-MSZP, in particular, is notable for its distinctly non-generational logic: the allegation is precisely not that the forces that have governed since 1989 are all the same – this cannot be, given how long the MSZP has itself been around and in power – but that a self-enriching and power-abusing ‘Fidesz elite’ has established itself *since 2010*, the founding moment of the NER as a hegemonic reordering of the post-1989 space. In this context, it is also worth noting the gradual deradicalization of Jobbik’s nationalist populism, which went from declaring opposition to a power bloc of all ‘politicians’ in 2010 and ‘the parties of the past 24 years’ (‘Fidesz’ and ‘MSZP’) in 2014 to emphasizing opposition to a ‘Fidesz government’ in the 2018 elections, indicating a shift in Jobbik’s populism in this latter phase away from a generational counterhegemonic logic and toward a specifically *anti-NER* counterhegemonic one. In Poland, the populist discourses of RP and Kukiz’15 follow a fourth-generation dynamic of opposing both PiS and PO as part of ‘the same elites’, but neither formation manages to reproduce itself as an independent electoral force beyond one legislative term.

These context-specific findings have numerous implications for the lines of inquiry outlined in the previous section. First, even for Hungary and Poland as oft-cited cases of ‘democratic backsliding’, it cannot be said that populism necessarily becomes authoritarian in power:

the populisms of Fidesz and PiS take on an authoritarian character specifically in close conjunction with nationalism and/or anti-liberalism (Fidesz 1997, 2002–2004, 2014–2018; PiS 2005–2007, 2019), but not when they are primarily social-populist (Fidesz 2006–2009, PiS 2007–2014), while the authoritarianisms of both parties often find largely non-populist nationalist or even institutionalist expression (Orbán’s ‘central field of power’). Based on this in-depth analysis, numerous parties considered ‘populist’ in the literature cannot be classified as populist or can be classified as such only for short-lived phases, with Smer hardly featuring any populist characteristics after 2002 and PiS being the only party in the PiS–SRP–LRP coalition of 2006–2007 that actually featured a populist discourse in government. While centrist populism is a notable phenomenon mostly occurring in a generational counterhegemonic guise (VV, ANO, Smer), the demand for replacing corrupt elites who are ‘all the same’ is hardly unique to centrist populism. Indeed, in the nationalist-populist discourses of Jobbik, Kukiz’15 and SRP, the rejection of corrupt, incompetent elites and the opposition to a liberal politics of transition are intimately linked. This diversity can likewise be seen with ‘fourth-generation’ populist discourses, which include ‘radical’ nationalist variants such as Jobbik and Kukiz’15 as well as distinctive cases of liberal (RP) or conservative populism (OLaNO) alike.

CONCLUSION

As the foregoing discussion illustrates, populism in CEE is a complex mosaic requiring nuanced, context-sensitive analysis, which often ends up challenging simple binaries such as centrist/radical or democratic/authoritarian; it is also a fast-moving field, with new political developments in the region posing new research challenges and questions. Tasks for ongoing and future research include differentiated examination of (1) the extents and forms in which the prolonged governing terms of Fidesz and PiS, as well as the first populist-led (OLaNO-headed) government in Slovakia, are characterized by populism in power; (2) the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, including open conflicts within the aforementioned Polish and Slovak governments, as well as the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has drastically altered political settings in the post-Soviet space and beyond it, including the growing geopolitical isolation of nationalist governments pursuing ‘multi-vector’ foreign policies in Hungary and Serbia; (3) the role of anti-populism and/or populism in the context of shifting fields of party competition that have seen the formation of broad pre-election alliances against ANO and Fidesz in the Czech and Hungarian contexts, respectively (with success in the former case and failure in the latter); and (4) the potential intersections between populism and the emergence of new green-left parties as major electoral players in the Western Balkans. In approaching all these lines of inquiry, future scholarship will be needed that is both case-specific and wide-ranging in scope, linking contextually informed as well as broadly comparative analyses across sub-regions of CEE such as Southeastern Europe, the post-Soviet states of Eastern Europe as well as the V4 countries of East-Central Europe.

NOTES

1. From this perspective, drawing on the ‘discursive architectonics’ approach of De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017), populism is conceptually distinguishable from (but empirically combinable with) nationalism, which is centred on the construction of ‘the nation’ against non-national others.

2. Another example would be the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, which shares with numerous East-Central European counterparts an ethno-linguistic irredentist nationalism with elements of populism.
3. This section draws on parts of chapter 7 of Kim (2022: 274–280).
4. SRP has been left out here due to its electoral marginality until 2001, but its discourse during this initial phase (1993–2001) arguably fits more closely the mould of populist nationalism.

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36. Populism in Southeast Asia

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INTRODUCTION

‘Miracle’ is a word that was once associated with Southeast Asia. The ‘newly industrializing economies’ of Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand in the 1990s dazzled the world with high growth rates and rapid development after decades of economic strife. In recent years, however, Southeast Asia has grabbed global headlines not for its economic miracles but for a different reason. Social fissures resulting from exponential growth are deepening, and these fissures, we argue, are rendered visible through the politics of populism.

This chapter provides an overview of populist politics in Southeast Asia. We draw on the ‘performative turn’ in the study of populism by defining populist politics as emotionally driven performances that pit ‘the people’ against ‘the dangerous other’ (see Moffitt and Tormey 2014; also see Kissas 2020). We recognize that there are various and competing definitions of populism in the literature; however, for the purposes of this chapter, we find it analytically useful to foreground the performative character of populist politics not only to capture the political style of the region’s populist leaders but also to characterize the various ways in which populist leaders and supporters enact, visualize and verbalize populist politics in Southeast Asia’s highly networked societies.

This chapter is structured in four parts. We begin by characterizing Southeast Asia as a ‘hotspot’ of populist practices by situating our analysis in the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 and briefly explain why we use a performative approach to populism as the organizing logic of our analysis. We then turn to three paradigmatic case studies of populism in Southeast Asia: class-based populism in Thailand, penal populism in the Philippines and nationalist populism in Indonesia. In each of these cases, we discuss how populist leaders and supporters perform populist practices. We conclude the chapter by reflecting on how lessons learned from the region can travel to other parts of the world.

POPULIST POLITICS IN ‘MIRACULOUS’ SOUTHEAST ASIA

During the mid-1980s to early 1990s, Southeast Asia became the hub for economic growth in the developing world, outpacing its counterparts in Latin America and Africa. Instead of implementing wholesale market reforms often backed by brutal military dictatorships as was the case in Latin America in the 1980s, Southeast Asia’s ‘tiger economies’ engaged in a state-led process of development, buoyed by Japanese investment (Jomo 2001). In 1997, the Asian Financial Crisis put an abrupt stop to Southeast Asia’s growth story. The region’s reliance on foreign direct investment made it vulnerable to ‘easily reversible capital flows’ which rendered economies at the mercy of global finance (Jomo 2003: 14). This was facilitated by relatively weak forms of banking and financial regulations which left countries helpless once the initial signs of the crisis flared up (Liew 1998). The implications and long-term impact

of the Asian Financial Crisis are relatively uneven across our case countries: Thailand was described as the most affected country as it was most exposed to ‘hot investments’, while the Philippines was viewed as least affected, mainly because it was least exposed to foreign direct investment when the crisis hit the region (De Castro 2007).

Economic dislocation deepened the grievances among the affected populations. Within this context, the financial crisis and the disparity of wealth were elevated into a crucial election issue facilitating the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand. Unlike other populist actors such as Hugo Chávez in Venezuela (Hawkins 2003) or SYRIZA in Greece (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014) who became leading voices against neoliberal policies, Thaksin did not provide a coherent programme against the imposition of neoliberalism in Thailand. The collapse of leftist movements in the region over the course of the post-World War 2 period (Quimpo 2020) allowed populists to hijack progressive political and economic issues (Robison and Hadiz 2020). Complicating this narrative in recent years is the rising middle class – the so-called ‘winners of globalization’ – that drives populist politics, challenging mainstream understanding of populism as primarily a movement driven by so-called ‘left-behind’ communities (Curato 2017; Fossati and Mietzner 2019). The demand of this middle-class base is not focused on redistributive policies but on a more conservative agenda centred around promoting law and order, particularly by addressing crime in the region (Pepinsky 2017).

Studies of populism in Southeast Asia have also highlighted its use as a political strategy. These studies foreground the unmediated links that populist leaders establish with their supporters in their bid to gain and retain power (Kenny 2019). Populist political strategies are particularly effective in the context of Southeast Asia which is characterized by weak electoral parties, enabling charismatic populist leaders such as Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines to rise to power by directly appealing to the voters and local allies and sidestepping established political parties (Kenny 2019; Robison and Hadiz 2020: 156).

While the economic and strategic approaches to understanding populism in Southeast Asia sheds light on key social transformations in the region, this approach risks conceptual overreach. Populists are not the only actors that emerged from periods of crisis in the region. There are some unconventional political leaders who did not employ populist strategies based on *anti-elitism* and *people-centrism* (Hatherell and Welsh 2020). However, populists differ from these unconventional leaders that emerge out of crises in Southeast Asia because of how they ‘perform’ and ‘enact’ their affinity with the people, as opposed to leaders who propose technocratic solutions as a way out of the crises. We argue that there is something conceptually distinct and contextually specific about the rise of populist leaders in the region that goes beyond economic and political/strategic explanations.

In this chapter, our interest lies in the performance of populist politics in Southeast Asia and how it is experienced by their supporters in the region. Our approach analyses populist politics by examining how populists: (1) construct and perform a crisis; (2) draw battle lines between ‘the people’ suffering from a crisis and the ‘other’ that caused it; and (3) the relationship populist leaders claim to have with the people they represent and how these relationships are cultivated, sustained and/or diminished (Moffitt and Tormey 2014; also see Kissas 2020). We show that the performance of populism is dependent on displaying *authenticity* of the relationship between the populist leader and their supporters. This display of authenticity of the populist leader and their politics establishes links with the ‘people’ that they claim to represent (Ostguy and Moffit 2021). We consider populism as a mutually constitutive relationship

between the populist leader and populist supporters. The relational component of populism moves beyond explanations of one-way manipulation or demagoguery between the populist and the people by showing how the performance of speaking for the people and articulating their claims are received by the 'people' (Ostiguy 2017) We highlight this argument across populist politics in three Southeast Asian countries: Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia.

THAILAND: PERFORMING CLASS-BASED POPULISM

Among the countries worst hit by the Asian Financial Crisis of the mid-1990s, it was only Thailand that experienced a 'populist backlash' (Choi 2005: 49). Business tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra and his newly formed party Thai Rak Thai (TRT/Thais love Thais) won 248 of the 500 seats in the country's National Assembly during the 2001 general election. For some observers, Thaksin's quick rise to power was driven by his populist agenda. TRT criticized the ruling Democrat Party (Phak Prachathipat), led by Chuan Leekpai, for embracing a free market ideology, manifested in billions of public spending in saving the banking system instead of providing subsidies to Thailand's rural economy. Thaksin provided an alternative to Chuan's market-friendly regime by proposing greater state support to agriculture and small and medium enterprises, such as a moratorium on interest repayments of farmers' loans and provision of loans to support small and medium enterprises.

However, others argue that Thaksin's early years adopted a 'very mild, almost imperceptible, populist rhetoric' (Hawkins and Selway 2017: 373). Unlike class-based populisms in Latin America, Thaksin did not articulate a clear rejection of neoliberalism or capitalism, or even wealthy elites; after all, Thaksin himself is the paradigmatic example of a successful capitalist who is part of Thailand's economic elite. Thaksin's first term in office was characterized as 'pluto-populism', which refers to a strategic alliance of big businesses and small businessmen affected by the financial crisis and the rural poor, held together by a nationalist logic (Baker 2004). However, as Thaksin's term extended this nationalist logic would recede to the background, giving way to 'business populism', a form of populism defined by promoting redistributive policies to the poor but whose core structure is dependent on a coalition of big businesses (Phongpaichit and Baker 2005).

It was only during his second term (2005–2006) that Thaksin embraced a class-based, anti-elite populist rhetoric, which was initially seen as a strategy for political survival. At that time, he was marred by corruption charges that saw civil society groups and royalist supporters rally against corruption and tax avoidance by the Shinawatra family. With an opposition determined to undermine his second term through mass mobilization, Thaksin had to embrace 'the people' and 'learn' populism (Hewison 2017). Thaksin increased his rhetorical attacks against his political opponents – a combination of civil society, royalist forces, academics and the military – by describing these protests as staged by 'conspiring elites' who were out to sabotage his administration's success in pro-poor policies including universal health care, debt moratorium for farmers and fuel subsidies. Thaksin elevated the 'people' centred around Thai rural society, rooting himself within the rural constituencies of Thailand and consolidating control in the northeastern regions of the country, which was dominated by farmers. He forged alliances with farmer organizations and environmental social movements and implemented economic redistribution programmes that catered to the interests of the rural population.

While these redistributive programmes helped in securing electoral support throughout his campaigns (Phongpaichit and Baker 2005), it was Thaksin's populist performance that solidified his links with the 'people'. He did this by projecting images as a man of the people and 'flaunting the low' (Ostiguy 2017) in Thai politics. Thaksin used the media to show that he was a man of the people. His first public image shift to populism happened immediately after the 2005 elections, when he appeared in a reality television show visiting a poor district in northeast Thailand (Hewison 2017). In this show, he lived in a communal house, travelled riding a motorcycle and addressed village issues on the spot, topped up with hugging elderly women in the villages (Hewison 2017: 434). While his political opponents mocked these performances, the rural masses embraced Thaksin as one of their own. He spiced up this performance with crude remarks regarding his sex life and speaking in local slang, a stark contrast to his earlier speeches that emphasized business buzzwords such as 'modernity' and 'globalization' (Phongpaichit and Baker 2005). Thaksin did not just sound like the everyday man, he also started to look like one, swapping his business suits for unbuttoned sleeveless shirts, emphasizing his affinity with working people (Phongpaichit and Baker 2005).

Thaksin's rule ended abruptly in 2006. While he was in New York to attend the United Nations General Assembly, the Thai military launched a coup and ousted him from office. Thaksin's critics justified the coup as a necessary intervention as Thailand's democracy was presumed as being held hostage by an uneducated rural electorate whose support for Thaksin was a result of mass clientelism (Winichakul 2008). Anti-Thaksin groups portrayed themselves as 'moral royalists opposed to corrupt, elected politicians' (Kanchoochat and Hewison 2016: 374), while Thaksin's supporters were portrayed as 'credulous rural masses lacking sophistication or civil competence' (Seo 2019: 561).

From the perspective of Thaksin's supporters, however, their relationship with Thaksin goes much deeper than mass clientelism. Andrew Walker's (2008) ethnographic work in northern Thailand showed that voters interpret cash handouts not as bribes but as politicians' participation in 'local circuits of exchange' (Walker 2008: 90). People with resources and social stature are expected to extend material assistance to those who need it, whether it takes the form of loans, gifts to children or provision of transportation. Others argued that there was a deeper motivation in voting for Thaksin as some considered him an alternative to the entrenched elites in Thailand composed of the royalty, the military and the bureaucracy, who had been conspiring to deny Thaksin and his rural supporters basic democratic rights (Tausig 2014).

Thaksin's ouster has not restored harmony in the Thai electoral system; rather, the immediate fallout revealed a polarization of Thai politics. Pro-Thaksin supporters morphed into a movement (Seo 2019) and staged regular protests in Bangkok wearing red shirts following his ouster. The lowest point of these protests happened in 2010 when the protesters faced a brutal crackdown from the military, leaving at least 90 people dead (Hewison 2012). While Thaksin was barred from running for any electoral posts, his sister Yingluck Shinawatra ran and won the election and became prime minister in 2011. However, Yingluck was removed from office after another coup in 2014 which formally installed a military junta as the ruling authority in Thailand. Chris Baker (2016) noted that the 2014 coup was 'engineered' to decisively remove the influence of Thaksin from Thai politics. Nonetheless, this is a challenging scenario for Thailand, as the strategy for countering populist mobilization has been a reliance on the military, risking further deterioration of democratic governance as well as stoking political tensions in the country (Lorch 2021: 88–89).¹

PERFORMATIVE STRONGMAN: PENAL POPULISM IN THE PHILIPPINES

The Philippines has a history of leaders exhibiting populist tendencies by articulating popular demands under the umbrella of nationalist ‘self-determination’ and targeting an external ‘other’ such as colonialist/international interests and their local oligarch allies that undermine national development (Webb and Curato 2019). However, a different form of populism emerged in the late 1990s, as then vice president Joseph ‘Erap’ Estrada became president based on a type of class-based populist politics that was based on his movie star image as a Robin Hood hero/friend of the poor (Hedman 2001).

In 2016, Rodrigo Duterte, the former mayor of Davao City, was elected as president of the Philippines. While Duterte’s politics entails an eclectic mix of class-based and nationalist populism (Curato 2017), his style can be more accurately described as ‘penal populism’, a form of populism that seeks to address the public’s demand to be ‘tough on crime’ with harsher forms of social control (Curato 2016: 94). His aim was to deal with a purported ‘drug menace’ via extrajudicial means – particularly the killing of suspected drug pushers and users. His no-nonsense approach to crime earned him the monicker ‘The Punisher’ and endeared him to his voting base, particularly the middle class. To understand the appeal of Duterte, we need to look at how the legitimacy of his predecessor, Benigno Aquino III, was challenged.²

Benigno Aquino III won the 2010 presidential elections on a platform of anti-corruption and good governance and his term was marked by an anti-corruption drive, which saw the conviction of former president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (Aquino’s predecessor and Estrada’s successor) and several senators over corruption charges. Aquino’s term also oversaw sustained economic growth for the country, which made the Philippines a favourable destination for foreign investment. However, this economic growth did not redound to better social services and infrastructure for a rising middle class. Aquino’s term was also marred by a perceived deterioration of law and order, the lowest point being the Mamasapano massacre, a police operation to arrest an ISIS operative in Mindanao which resulted in friendly fire between the police and the military, leaving 44 police commandos dead. This incident precipitated the steepest decline in the approval ratings of Aquino and served as fuel for the rise of Duterte, who was seen by the public as a leader who could solve the political and economic scandals that had rocked the Aquino administration (Teehankee 2017).

In terms of political style, Duterte’s penal populism perfected the amplification of ‘crisis, breakdown, threat’ (Moffitt and Tormey 2014: 391) through the discursive logic of constructing ‘criminals’ as the dangerous other to be exterminated (Curato 2016: 94). The problems of the people (and the nation) were blamed on the proliferation of criminals who threaten the security of the nation’s fabric.³ Duterte’s rhetoric against illegal drugs is a mark of ‘securitization’, a discursive approach that transforms a normal problem into a security threat that threatens Filipino society (Quimpo 2017). By exaggerating the scale of the drug problem, Duterte legitimated the use of extrajudicial means to address the problem (Quimpo 2017: 147–151).

The construction of the people in Duterte’s penal populism is not as clearly defined as Thaksin’s class-based populism. As noted by Ronald Holmes (2017), Duterte’s electoral support cuts across all social classes. Duterte’s people can be defined as the ‘ordinary’ Filipino man, with simple tastes and joys. This construction of the ‘people’ is seen in Duterte’s performative populism that allowed him to secure and maintain a relationship with the public. One of the most cited reasons for his enduring support is his ‘authenticity’. Duterte presented

himself as the antithesis to the political establishment, wearing plaid polo shirts in lieu of business suits and eating with his bare hands in local canteens (Arguelles 2019). His relatively simple way of living allowed him to establish a rapport with a public longing for an authentic political figure who they could claim as their own. He preferred speaking in Cebuano, a language of Visayan settlers in Mindanao, over using English or Filipino, which allowed him to establish affinity with the Visayan everyday man (Abinales 2022). Duterte also amplified the ‘coarsening of political rhetoric’ (Moffitt and Tormey 2014: 392) through coarse language such as rape jokes that made him even more popular to his voting base. Duterte’s supporters rationalized this by arguing that this was part of his ‘authentic’ appeal (Curato and Ong 2018). While Duterte’s rhetoric of penal populism does not specify the elite as an opponent, it is his performance as an everyday person that allows him to speak for the people and to distance himself from the elite.

Duterte’s term concluded in 2022 and a new president, Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., was elected in the elections of that year. Marcos, Jr. was elected on a combination of authoritarian nostalgia and ‘good vibes’ politics where, in a complete antithesis to Duterte’s campaign, he did not engage in attacking ‘the elite’ or any politician (Curato 2022). Instead, Marcos Jr’s landslide electoral victory appealed to national unity, which, arguably, is doublespeak for evading accountability and assigning blame to both the Duterte administration and his father’s Martial Law regime.

NATIONALIST POPULISM IN INDONESIA

Indonesia has been characterized as a country with ‘competing populisms’ (Hadiz and Robison 2017) – the ‘polite’ populism of Joko Widodo (Mietzner 2015) and the religious populism of political Islam (Hadiz 2018) being some examples. Contemporary Indonesian politics, however, is continuously challenged by nationalist populism. Nationalist populism is a discursive strategy defined along national lines, targeting a foreign elite as the cause of the poverty and deprivation of the Indonesian people (Hellmann 2017).

The roots of nationalist populism stem from a long legacy of anti-colonial struggle in Indonesia. Indonesia’s first ruler after Dutch colonialism was Sukarno, a leader of the anti-colonialist resistance against the Dutch and the Japanese invasion during the war. Sukarno, who ruled from 1945 to 1967, relied on the rhetoric of nationalist populism which targeted colonial forces and their local elite allies who subjugated the Indonesian ‘people’ (Mietzner 2018: 371). To secure political control, Sukarno managed an uneasy alliance of actors across the political spectrum, from forces allied with the Communist Party of Indonesia (Partai Komunis Indonesia/PKI) to the left and the military and Islamic conservative forces to the right. This power struggle led to a deadly confrontation known as the September 30 Movement, when an alleged coup by the PKI led to the murder of six Indonesian generals. A little-known army officer, Major General Suharto, staged a counter coup which resulted in a bloodbath of alleged cadres and supporters of the PKI, with an estimated 1–2 million deaths in a genocidal operation that spanned several months and encompassed the entire country (Robinson 2017). In one swoop, the most powerful social movement in Indonesia, the PKI was decimated, and Sukarno was marginalized from power (Hadiz 2021).

For 30 years, Suharto ruled as a dictator of Indonesia and oversaw the transformation of the Indonesian economy through a dependence on exports of national resources such as minerals

and forest products. However, the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 resulted in an economic crisis that derailed the regime. During the crisis, the country's gross domestic product plummeted by as much as 20 per cent and this drop was felt across various sectors of the economy and society, particularly in the speculative construction industry. The financial crisis was compounded by a political one as Suharto was unwilling to relinquish power and there was a lack of mechanisms to express people's grievances (Rodrik 1999).

What followed the 1997 crisis was a steady process of democratization, marked by street protests and culminating in the introduction of elections for the head of state for the first time in 2004. However, this democratization process benefited the oligarchs who were in control of several strategic interests as their wealth was translated in political power (Hadiz 2004; Winters 2013). The long history of the decimation of the Indonesian Left and the hindering of liberal democratic politics left a vacuum in the articulation of grievances stemming from social and economic dislocation brought about by the economic liberalization of the country (Hadiz 2021).

Grievances related to economic and social dislocation and brought about by the uncertainties of the post-Suharto years found expression in the resurgence of nationalist populism in the 2000s. The archetype for this nationalist populism is Prabowo Subianto, an ex-general during the Suharto regime who became a formidable challenger for the Indonesian presidency during the 2014 and 2019 elections. Ironically, Prabowo was part of the oligarchs who were able to translate the wealth that they had accumulated during the Suharto regime into political power. However, this background did not prevent Prabowo from adopting a populist image. Emulating his personal hero, Sukarno, Prabowo's populist rhetoric was characterized by a nationalist framing of Indonesia's economic problems and attacking the local elites of Indonesian politics.

Prabowo's economic nationalism framed the financial crisis as an 'economic war' against Indonesians, targeting neoliberal policies such as trade deregulation and liberalization of investment regimes for creating a system unfavourable to Indonesians. He also emphasized the concept of *kebocoran* (leaks), stressing how Indonesia's wealth from natural resources 'leaked' overseas (Hatherell and Welsh 2020: 58–59). During his 2014 campaign, Prabowo called for greater restrictions on foreign investments and, called for revivals of populist economic policies such as cooperatives and a 'people's economy' (Aspinall 2015: 14–15). Prabowo also attacked the local elites, framing them as co-conspirators with foreigners in letting the wealth of Indonesia leak out of the country, and accused them as being too weak to stop the leakage (Hatherell and Welsh 2020).

Prabowo reinforced this rhetoric with his populist performance, inspired by his two idols: Sukarno and Hugo Chávez. During his public appearances, Prabowo dressed like Sukarno and spoke in the same booming oratorical manner as his idol. At other times, he decked himself in military regalia like Chávez, to emphasize his military background. As noted by one scholar, Prabowo's campaign sorties are 'hyper-masculine displays... amounting to a highly theatrical attempt to invoke the grandeur and passion of Indonesia's nationalist political tradition' (Aspinall 2015: 13).

Despite the populist challenge by Prabowo, he did not succeed in capturing the presidency in the 2014 and 2019 elections. While nationalist populism continues to be a driving force in Indonesian politics, religious populism, specifically Islamic populism, poses a challenge to democracy in the country (Hadiz 2018). Islamic populism is distinct from the nationalist forms of populism discussed earlier as it frames problems generated by social and economic changes

through Islamic references. For example, the problems of contemporary Indonesian society are attributed to the proliferation of morally bankrupt outsiders – usually ethnic Chinese businessmen. In recent years, there has been a perceptible shift in Prabowo’s populist campaign towards Islamic populism. In the 2014 elections, Prabowo framed ethnic Chinese as ‘foreign agents’ out to plunder Indonesia’s wealth, while his Islamist allies attacked his rival, Jokowi as a ‘Singaporean-Chinese’ and supported anti-Chinese protests led by Islamic populists in Jakarta in 2016 (Mietzner 2020: 1026–1028). As Hadiz (2021) argued, the destruction of the PKI in 1965–1966 and the subsequent vilification of leftist civil society actors in succeeding decades has left Islamic organizations and actors with the monopoly in addressing economic, social and political ills in contemporary Indonesian society, thus fuelling the rise of Islamic populism in the country.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter, we outlined the relevance of Southeast Asia as a region for understanding the emergence of populism as well as analysing the dynamics of populist support.

We focused on analysing the performative populism of different populists in the region to show how populism is enacted and how it is perceived by their supporters. We identified three archetypes for populist performances in the region: Thaksin Shinawatra’s ‘class-based populism’, Rodrigo Duterte’s ‘penal populism’ and Prabowo Subianto’s ‘nationalist populism’, which in recent years has synergized with a nascent ‘Islamic populism’ in Indonesia to delineate boundaries against ‘outsiders’. Through these cases, we showed how populism in Southeast Asia is best understood through analysing the ‘performative styles’ enacted through the combination of populist rhetoric as well as the curation of a populist image that is ‘authentic’ to the ‘people’.

In conclusion, we suggest that future research should consider deepening the understanding of performative populism in the region. First, future studies on performative populism need to consider deepening the analysis between the curation of populist performances with how they are mediated via technology, particularly through social media. While there has been a proliferation of studies on ‘fake news’ disseminated through social media and how they benefited populist actors such as Duterte (Ong and Cabañes 2018), there is still a lack of analysis on the sociological components of how social media technologies help establish the links between the populist leader and ‘the people’. Differences in social media platforms, accessibility to devices and content creation can help create different facets of populist performance.

Second, future studies can focus on the social processes that influence how such populist performances are received by the grassroot supporters of populist actors. Studies on populist supporters are few and far between (for exceptions see Arguelles 2019; Curato 2016; Seo 2017) and thus, there is still a gap in understanding how populist performances are mediated and transmitted to the audience as most studies treat the latter as readily accepting the message and performance of populism.

Last, the time is ripe for comparative analysis of populist performances in Southeast Asia with their counterparts in regions that are considered bastions of populist studies, such as, but not limited to, Latin America and Europe. There are intriguing theoretical insights from a comparative analysis of the bombastic populist styles of Thaksin, Duterte and Prabowo with

Hugo Chávez or Jair Bolsonaro that can help advance scholarship as well as engagement with populism.

NOTES

1. The military junta period in Thailand since 2014 has not seen an end to political mobilization; rather, civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations and grassroots movements have continued to mobilize and contest the legitimacy of the Thai military junta (Lorch 2021).
2. Benigno Aquino III is the son of Senator Benigno ‘Ninoy’ Aquino, Jr. and former president Corazon ‘Cory’ Aquino. Ninoy Aquino was an opposition senator who was a vocal critic of the former dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, Sr. who ruled as dictator when the Philippines was put under martial law from 1972 to 1986. In the wake of Aquino, Jr.’s assassination in 1983, popular protests became widespread, especially in urban areas in the Philippines. His wife, Cory, ran against Marcos in the 1985 snap elections which were marred by widespread electoral fraud. A popular protest in February 1986 culminated in the People Power (EDSA) revolution which ousted Marcos, Sr. and installed Cory Aquino as the first post-Marcos president in the Philippines. See Thompson (1995) for an extensive discussion on the protest movement that ousted Marcos during the EDSA revolution.
3. Duterte is the archetype of penal populism in the region that is also a marker of a distinct Southeast Asian populism. Thaksin Shinawatra ran an earlier, equally bloody campaign against methamphetamine in Thailand in 2003, which resulted in at least 1,688 deaths (McCargo and Ukrist 2005: 245).

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37. Populism in Africa

Sishuwa Sishuwa

INTRODUCTION

Recent political events across the globe have brought populism to the centre of political debates. This interest in populism has been sparked in part by the emergence of anti-establishment political actors and movements on both the right and left of the political spectrum. The rise of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia and most recently Donald Trump in the United States, and the meteoric emergence of populist leaders in Europe, in the mould of Hungary's Viktor Orbán and France's ultra-nationalist Jean-Marie Le Pen, have brought the study of populism to the centre stage of academic debates (Kaltwasser et al. 2017).

The term 'populism' is sometimes ambivalent. It has been used to describe both the positive and negative political practices of political entrepreneurs seeking popular support from diverse constituencies. Populism both undermines and inspires democracy. While populism has the potential to be inclusive as it encourages the participation of marginalized constituencies (such as the urban poor) in politics, populists in government tend to pursue undemocratic and authoritarian policies contrary to their declarations during electoral campaigns (Barr 2009; Cheeseman 2018; Moffitt 2016; Roberts 2015).

Following Danielle Resnick (2019), populism is defined in this chapter as 'a political strategy aimed at fostering direct links between a leader and the masses, an ideational concept that relies on discourses that conjure a corrupt elite and the pure people, and a set of socio-cultural performances characterized by a leader's charisma, theatrics, and transgression of accepted norms'. Nic Cheeseman (2018) further posits that populism is quintessentially a political strategy of mass political mobilization that employs a discursive style using language and theatrical performance to discredit the status quo and the elites, by showing them as corrupt and insensitive to the plight of the common person. In their pursuit of power, populists claim to be better positioned than the elites to represent the people and be empathetic to people's plight. Populists claim a dichotomy between a corrupt elite and marginalized, disadvantaged masses, who are often the poor. Populists claim the status of being the people's redeemers, who will deliver the people to the promised land where power will be in the people's hands (Sishuwa 2011; Weyland 2017).

Recent scholarship on populism in Africa has focused on a combination of ethno-populism and mobilization of poor, marginalized urban constituencies (Cheeseman 2018; Cheeseman and Hinfelaar 2010; Larmer and Fraser 2007; Resnick 2019). This scholarship has focused more on populist strategies used by opposition politicians to mobilize support than on populists in power. A glaring limitation is the failure of current scholarship to document the cumulative knowledge of the evolution of populist strategies on the continent. Recent studies tend to focus on the emergence of populist leaders in the 2000s, especially those who successfully used populist strategies to win power (Zambia) or to challenge incumbents (Kenya and South Africa).

This chapter aims to rectify such limitations by tracing the evolving nature of populism across late-colonial and post-colonial African politics. The chapter identifies waves of populist mobilization in Africa, considers the most important characteristics of populism in each wave and highlights continuities and shifts over time. The first wave occurred during the nationalist campaign against colonial rule in the 1950s and early 1960s. The second took place in the early decades of independence as opposition parties sought to present the governing elites as having failed to meet popular expectations. The third happened under systems of one-party state, as members of parliament sought to build support bases in political systems that were weighted heavily against such practices. All these waves predate the fourth wave of the populism of multi-party politics in the early 2000s. The first three waves were mostly about the structure and control of political institutions. The fourth wave was about economic inequality.

The chapter comprises six sections. Following this introduction, the second section discusses populism and nationalist campaigns. The third section considers populism in the post-independence period during the early years of independence (1960s and early 1970s). The fourth section discusses populism under the one-party state. The fifth section examines populism under multi-party politics during the 2000s. The last section is the conclusion.

POPULISM AND NATIONALIST CAMPAIGNS

Populism has been used as an effective strategy for political mobilization in Africa since the nationalist campaigns of the colonial period in the 1950s and early 1960s. Unlike populism, nationalism is related to a struggle for freedom from foreign domination and tends to encompass large constituencies. The distinction between populism and nationalism is one that Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis (2017) have addressed adequately. What remains to be said is that populism and nationalism share common characteristics (Brubaker 2020; Singh 2021). These are collective grievances and resentment against the rulers, the (colonial) elite and their allies (businesspeople and other privileged groups) and a marginalized mass constituency, who are often the poor. These two characteristics, it is worth emphasizing, are region-specific and would be present only to very specific forms of nationalism (i.e. anti-colonial, civic nationalism). They certainly would not fit with the exclusionary nationalism of the far right in contemporary Europe which essentially appeals to middle-class in-groups. There is also the kind of colonial nationalism that is very elitist; a good example in this regard is Margaret Thatcher's nationalism in the United Kingdom in the 1980s.

While campaigns against colonialism in Africa were aimed at achieving political and to some extent economic emancipation, those who led the anti-colonial struggle often employed populist strategies to mobilize popular support for the nationalist cause. In much of the continent, such individuals were charismatic leaders who creatively utilized populist strategies to mobilize popular opposition to colonial rule. Nationalist leaders also considered themselves indispensable in the fight against colonial rule. In Ghana, for example, Kwame Nkrumah considered himself the embodiment of the struggle for popular sovereignty. He claimed to be the messiah that the Ghanaian people needed to liberate themselves from colonial bondage. In Malawi, Hastings Kamuzu Banda, who led the independence movement in that country, was a charismatic figure who symbolized the people's opposition to colonial rule.

In Zambia, Kenneth Kaunda was considered the messiah the country needed to challenge British colonial rule. Starting in the late 1950s, Kaunda was adept at addressing the people

directly through mass rallies and later through radio and television, and at mobilizing and maintaining popular support and influence, especially via mass party membership and party control over various civic associations. Kaunda had a charismatic and strong personality, and dressed distinctively (first a toga; this was soon replaced by a safari suit, which became *de rigueur* among party leaders).

A common feature of the nationalist leaders across Africa was their lack of detail about their future policies and the structural factors underlying economic inequality in their societies. As Miles Larmer (2013) argued, colonists were criticized not because of identified weaknesses in their policies, but because they did not have the nation's interests at heart. Unrealistic promises made by nationalists during the late-colonial era were the source of many of the thwarted expectations for independence, and of the populist figures that emerged in the wake of independence.

One specific feature of the populist strategies adopted during nationalist campaigns was the use of what Alastair Fraser (2017) referred to as 'political theatre', that is, the public performances that employed vulgar language and non-conformity to established etiquette and norms. In Zambia, for instance, Kaunda led popular demonstrations against pass laws, including the burning of colonial identity cards that restricted the movement of Africans between rural and urban areas. In Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta was another charismatic figure who challenged the colonial government. He often went on hunger strikes to show how close to the people's plight he was.

What is clear is that in almost all African countries, colonial campaigns were led by strong and charismatic leaders who were almost synonymous with the nationalist movement itself. This was the case with Nyerere in Tanzania, Nkrumah in Ghana and Kenyatta in Kenya. These leaders were rooted in the people and used populist strategies to mobilize mass resentment against colonial rule. They went to jail to demonstrate their empathy for the common people and denounced the colonial system as exploitative.

Furthermore, nationalist campaigns promised a better society in which freedom would be enjoyed by all citizens, who would be guaranteed equal opportunity, access to basic social services, such as education and health, and an improved standard of living. The populist-nationalist leader in late-colonial Africa mobilized popular support by using public rallies, strong language and local idioms, by presenting the colonial status quo as illegitimate and by showing that power belonged to the common people. The people were promised inclusion in decision making post-independence. Charismatic leadership also played an important role in nationalist campaigns as it accorded leaders unmitigated direct ties with the people (Sishuwa 2020a).

'WHERE ARE THE FRUITS OF INDEPENDENCE?': POPULISM AFTER INDEPENDENCE

Many African countries, such as Ghana, Kenya and Zambia, had big expectations which were slowly dashed post-independence, and this paved the way for a second wave of populist mobilizations in the first and second decades of the competitive multi-party political systems inherited from the departing colonists. The nascent opposition parties, whose leaders had been allies with those now in power, sought to present the governing elites as failing to meet the popular expectations of independence. Like the late-colonial nationalists, the opposition had

campaign messages marked by a lack of emphasis on the structural factors underlying economic inequality, but the messages were enough to generate popular support. In response, the ruling elites in several African countries, including Zambia, cast opposition parties as agents of foreign interests, and imposed one-party states between the early 1970s and the early 1980s. By the late 1980s, many of the expected improvements in people's lives had been frustrated, allowing populism – the third wave – to be used by political entrepreneurs as an effective strategy for mobilizing support within the one-party state (Sishuwa 2024).

As in nationalist campaigning, the new opposition parties were noted for their aversion to complex policymaking, a reliance on slogans and an assumption that the replacement of existing government or state personnel will bring about immediate and significant improvements. Existing governments and political opponents were often identified and construed as being in alliance with external actors. Those in office were seen as being in league with the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, while those in opposition were seen as stooges of a capitalist block led by the United States. Populists presented themselves this way in order to gain political support, not because of their deep-rooted political convictions.

African nationalists in office moved quickly to consolidate their hold on power by banning opposition parties, restricting political freedom and adopting measures that were harmful to the economy, such as consumer subsidies, import substitution industrialization and unsustainable large-scale infrastructural projects. The restriction of political space, which included the jailing and political marginalization of former colleagues who had participated in the nationalist struggle, precipitated the emergence of internal opposition to the newly installed nationalist leadership. The opposition to and resentment of the new authoritarian leaders provoked two tendencies. The first was organized opposition to the authoritarian regime. The second was military coups. Disillusioned by the lack of appreciable economic development, and by delays in the realization of promised social, economic and political rights, some members of the erstwhile nationalist movement, now in government, accused the new political elites of having betrayed the people. They asked their colleagues at the head of government, 'Where are the fruits of independence?' (Sishuwa 2024).

In Zambia, Kaunda's former colleagues in the nationalist movement, such as Nalumino Mundia and Simon Mwansa Kapwepwe, resigned their positions to form their own opposition parties. These two charismatic politicians used populist strategies to mobilize a popular base of support among their ethnic groups and the urban poor. The two firebrand politicians attracted mass crowds to their rallies, where they often denounced Kaunda and the policies of his governing United National Independence Party (UNIP). At a time when support for UNIP was like an article of faith, those who challenged the ruling party acquired cult status. Their growing popularity among ordinary Zambians attracted a vicious violent clampdown from the state security forces. This led to not only the banning of the two political parties, but also to the outlawing of all opposition in the country with the introduction of a one-party state in 1972 (Larmer 2011). The then main opposition party, the African National Congress (ANC), was dissolved and its members were persuaded to join UNIP in 1972. Effectively, UNIP swallowed the main opposition party and co-opted its leadership. A similar strategy was adopted by Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front in Zimbabwe in 1987 with the incorporation of ZAPU into the ruling party. In Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta's Kenya African National Union (KANU) merged with the then opposition Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) in 1964, effectively establishing a *de facto* one-party state.

An important feature of the nature of opposition politics in some African countries in the immediate aftermath of independence was the emergence of leaders who utilized populist strategies of mobilization to appeal to a mass audience. In Zambia, charismatic leaders targeted the marginalized poor, especially in urban areas, with a message that UNIP leaders had betrayed the promise of independence and were oblivious to the plight of the people (Sishuwa 2024). Even though the two opposition parties that broke away from UNIP were characterized as pursuing narrow ethno-regional agendas, they were led by charismatic populist leaders who appealed to a wider constituency beyond their own ethnic groups. In 1971, Kapwepwe contested and won a parliamentary seat while he was in prison, which illustrated his popularity.

Another important feature of the populist African nationalists who assumed power in the 1960s was their aversion to competitive politics, and their presentation of opposition parties as agents of foreign powers. Leaders like Kaunda, Nyerere, Kenyatta and Banda came into power under democratic multi-party constitutions left behind by departing colonial regimes. Before long, some of them changed the constitution to a 'one-party democracy' in the name of guarding their countries against foreign influence. This illustrates the tendency of populists to present opponents as detrimentally associated with foreign entities. Where one-party rule was not imposed by law, it was imposed in practice. Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, leaders like Banda in Malawi and Kaunda in Zambia became increasingly dictatorial, giving themselves powers to lock up their perceived political enemies indefinitely without any judicial process whatsoever, and often assuming powers not given to them by law. Notwithstanding their increasing dictatorial tendencies, both maintained their populist attributes and were the typical 'Big Man' style of president that became prevalent in Africa during this period.

The immediate post-independence period was characterized by military takeovers. Military coups, often led by a populist army captain, such as Yoweri Museveni in Uganda, were justified because of the failure of the nationalist generation (Resnick 2019). In several African countries, the military overthrew civilian governments, arguing that governing elites had betrayed the people with their failure to fulfil the promises of independence. Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, who had acquired an almost divine status and turned his country into a one-party state, was overthrown in 1966. His government was accused of corruption and economic mismanagement, and Nkrumah was blamed specifically for betraying Ghanaian people.

Military coups were launched in the name or on behalf of the people. For example, Flight Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings of Ghana used populist rhetoric to overthrow the government in December 1981, claiming that the civilian government, installed after the earlier military takeover, had mismanaged the economy and betrayed the people. Rawlings positioned himself as the people's champion, whose goal was to allow people to exercise their power by directly participating in the decision-making process of their country (Rothchild and Gyimah-Boadi 1989: 222). Captain Thomas Sankara, a charismatic army officer, overthrew the government in Burkina Faso, also with the intention of restoring power to the people against what he referred to as a 'corrupt and selfish national bourgeoisie and its imperialist allies' (Resnick 2019). In most cases, the military acted on a perceived popular resentment against the ruling elite and the state of economic mismanagement. Military rulers rarely use populist strategies to mobilize popular support. But Rawlings and Sankara, and to an extent Museveni in Uganda in the early years of his rule, utilized populist discourse and theatrical performances to position themselves as people's champions (Carbone 2005).

POPULISM UNDER THE ONE-PARTY STATE

The study of populism has often focused on popular mobilizations against one-party rule. There has been little scholarship around populist mobilization within the one-party state itself. Two critical junctures possibly contributed to the emergence of populist leaders in Africa within one-party states. The first took place during the 1970s and 1980s, and was often a challenge to authoritarian and one-man rule. Resnick (2019) and Nugent (2004) have suggested that leaders who emerged during this wave tended to focus on reconfiguring political institutions to allow for more inclusive and direct participation of the masses, and to dismantle the elite-dominated establishment put in place since independence. But Nugent (2004) argued that the main impetus for the emergence of populist leaders during this period was disillusionment with independence-era leaders, especially following massive economic decline and rampant corruption.

In their persuasive study on ethno-populism, Cheeseman and Larmer (2015: 31) argue that 'the effectiveness of ethnopopulist mobilization in any given country will be shaped by variations in the significance of the urban political economy and the extent to which ethnic identities have been politicized over time'. They hypothesize that 'ethnopopulist appeals will be hardest to sell where urban areas are politically marginal and communal identities are not prominent'. Indeed, during the one-party state period, populism was rarely publicly expressed due to the promotion of the party state, and the dominance of the president as the sole champion and voice of popular will. However, even within the closed political spaces of Africa's one-party states, populist leaders emerged and gave voice to public grievances, often within the existing status quo. As the most vocal critics of the one-party state risked arrest and detention for long prison terms, politicians and other prominent civic leaders used the platforms of parliament and civil society to criticize government policy and question the economic direction the government was taking (Lungu 1986). In Kenya and Zambia, for example, some politicians utilized populist strategies to mobilize mass support, especially during election campaigns within the one-party state itself.

These strategies were often informed by popular expectations of rapid socio-economic development, and by deteriorating economic situations, perceived increase in corruption among the political elite, perception of marginalization of certain regions in the distribution of national resources and regional or ethnic representation in national, government and state positions.

In Zambia, the establishment of a one-party state in 1972 did not completely eliminate criticism of government policy, nor the emergence of leaders that adopted populist modes of campaigning for elective office. Broadly speaking, populism took two forms. The first was outside the one-party state, utilized by leaders of mass organizations, such as trade unions and Christian churches. As the latter were not part of partisan politics per se, they often made public comments on issues of public policy, including low wages, the high cost of living, rising poverty, corruption and the poor performance of the economy occasioned by the relationship with international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This kind of populism built on Zambia's history of urban radicalism and trade union militancy (Larmer 2007). The Zambian trade union movement, led by Frederick Chiluba, offered a principled and vocal attack on the excesses and policy direction of the UNIP government. Chiluba, who was to become Zambia's president in later years, positioned himself as the spokesperson of the common people. At his public meetings, addressing union members

with political rhetoric no different from that of a populist politician, Chiluba used oratory and theatrical performances to demonstrate the suffering of the Zambian urban poor, including the workers. UNIP leaders condemned his speeches as inflammatory. Chiluba, unafraid in daring the government to arrest him, presented himself as a voice of the poor and hungry masses. He accused the UNIP leadership of living lavish lifestyles and being insensitive to the plight of the majority. In particular, Chiluba criticized the salaries of members of the Central Committee, cabinet ministers and other large UNIP party personnel paid directly from the national treasury as wasteful expenditures which could be used to improve the country's deteriorating economy (Lungu 1986).

In 1980, Chiluba delivered speeches to public meetings of workers and ordinary residents, condemning the authoritarian nature of the government and its policy failures on many fronts. His fiery speeches incited massive strikes and resulted in his arrest and detention alongside the detention of other union leaders charged with treason (Larmer 2011). Although he was released after a few months in detention, Chiluba established himself as a populist leader who spoke the language of the workers and the common person. It was therefore not surprising when he emerged as the natural leader of the opposition Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) and challenged Kaunda in the 1991 multi-party elections.

The second critical juncture that populism took in Africa's one-party states was witnessed in the parliamentary arena. In both Kenya and Zambia, for instance, some leaders who were unhappy with and frustrated by the ruling party's authoritarian and exclusive politics resigned and launched criticism of the state from outside the party system (Ndiiri and Okinda 2019; Sishuwa 2016). But a few who remained used the platform of parliament as backbenchers to question the failure of the government to fulfil the party's colonial-era promises, the deterioration in economic conditions, perceived wasteful public spending, corruption and an inequitable distribution of national resources and positions. In the case of Zambia, the most notable vocal critics included Michael Sata, who had honed his political career in the labour movement, where he built networks he was to exploit later. Sata entered mainstream politics in 1981 and adopted a populist campaign strategy by presenting himself as the people's champion and a man of action. He later mobilized popular support for increased public housing and improvement of urban slums of Lusaka (Sishuwa 2016, 2020b).

In Kenya, two politicians adopted populist mobilization strategies. These were Jaramogi Oginga Odinga and Martin Shikuku. Both started off as members of KADU and ended up in KANU, following the merger of the two parties in 1964. In 1968, Odinga and Shikuku were removed from their KANU positions after they lost in party elections and went on to form Kenya People's Union. Odinga was a fiery speaker who attracted large crowds to his rallies. He questioned KANU's record on job creation, the Africanization of the civil service and the general economic model adopted by Kenyatta's government. Odinga accused Kenyatta and KANU of pursuing a Western-oriented, export-based economic model as a cover for corruption and self-interest and advocated for socialist policies (Cheeseman and Larmer 2015). Shikuku, who referred to himself as the 'people's watchman' for his open critiques of the regime, was outspoken and articulated collective grievances of ordinary Kenyans. In 1975, he was arrested within the precincts of parliament for referring to KANU as a 'dead party' and he was only released in 1978, following the death of Jomo Kenyatta (Ndiiri and Okinda 2019).

The common feature of populists who emerged during the one-party state period is that they became the main advocates for a return to multi-party politics. In Kenya and Zambia, the politicians who opposed the one-party state from within were also in the forefront of leading

pro-democracy movements. Chiluba led the MMD and defeated President Kaunda in elections held in October 1991, amassing 75 per cent of the vote to Kaunda's 24 per cent. During the public rallies leading up to the 1991 elections, Chiluba deployed populist strategies in promising quick and easy solutions to people's problems. While he called for sacrifice, he assured his followers that he was the salvation Zambia needed to transform the economy wrecked by UNIP's uncaring policies. In Kenya, Odinga and Shikuku were among the founders of the Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD). They later split into FORD-Kenya for Odinga and FORD-Asili for Kenneth Matiba and Shikuku (Ndiiri and Okinda 2019). Although leadership dynamics within the pro-democracy movement affected their personal political fortunes, they effectively used populist messaging to portray themselves as the champions of the common Kenyans.

POPULISM IN THE ERA OF MULTI-PARTY DEMOCRACY

The fourth wave of populism in Africa started in the early 2000s and has been characterized by being highly personalized, and based on the charisma of the party leader; using symbols and unconventional language that are anti-establishment or that depart from established norms; promising easy solutions (often in short time periods); responding to deepening economic crises (often of public debt, unemployment and corruption); and articulating collective grievances and frustrations experienced by urban dwellers (usually the urban poor) and ethnic groups (to which the populist supposedly belongs), who claim marginalization. In addition, like populists in Europe, present-day African populists tend to promote an exclusionary populist narrative whereby they blame local problems on foreigners, such as ethnic minorities of Asian or Chinese origin.

There are at least three notable examples of populists that emerged in the 2000s in Africa. These are Raila Odinga in Kenya, Michael Sata in Zambia and Julius Malema in South Africa. Odinga's populist mobilization emerged during the 2002 presidential election. After falling out of favour with former vice president Mwai Kibaki, Odinga formed the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), a party that challenged and won 50 per cent of the 'no' vote in the 2005 national referendum on a draft constitution. Odinga has contested four presidential elections (2007, 2013, 2018 and 2022). In all these elections, he projected himself as the people's voice or the champion of the common Kenyan (Cheeseman and Larmer 2015; Resnick 2010b). In his campaigns, Odinga claimed that the elite were not only divorced from the concerns of the people but were also to blame for widespread inequality and exploitation in Kenya. Odinga is quoted by Resnick (2010b: 7) as saying: 'I give you a cast iron guarantee that I will be a champion of social justice and social emancipation – a champion of the poor, the dispossessed and the disadvantaged in our nation. I will redress this imbalance between the rich and the poor, between the satisfied and the hungry.'

In Zambia, Sata also viewed himself as the people's liberator, proclaiming himself the 'redeemer' (Sishuwa 2011). On the campaign trail in 2006, he suggested that economic salvation was just a short step away and could be achieved by transferring control of the state back into the hands of the ordinary Zambians represented by him. Although Sata's political platform was at times inconsistent and incoherent, his rhetoric demonstrates clear evidence of the kind of populist ideology described by Gidron and Bonikowski (2013: 5–6). At his public rallies, he complained about the domination of trading spaces by Chinese, Lebanese

and Asian businessmen, whom he promised to deport if elected to power. He was a master in the use of symbols and unconventional language at his rallies: he once ripped open a cabbage to symbolize decapitating his political rival – President Levy Mwanawasa – who had acquired the nickname of ‘cabbage’ following a road traffic accident in 1991.

In the case of South Africa, Jacob Zuma has been characterized as a populist because of the way he mobilized support to oust his predecessor Thabo Mbeki as president of the ANC in 2008, and later to campaign for the presidency of South Africa. Zuma operated within the existing status quo, unlike Julius Malema, the firebrand leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). Malema claims to represent poor black and marginalized people in South African society. He proclaimed himself the ‘son of the people’, who will restore land through nationalization without compensation. Like Sata, Malema adopted a combative and abrasive discursive style, including a mode of unconventional dress, where EFF members of parliament dressed in overalls and work suits in the South African parliament. During the State of the Nation addresses by Jacob Zuma and his successor, Cyril Ramaphosa, Malema and his EFF colleagues departed from parliamentary decorum by asking uncomfortable questions and heckling the head of state, including referring to both presidents as part of the ‘corrupt’ elite that is exploiting black Africans.

All cases discussed above effectively used direct contact with the people through rallies and relied on mobilizing the urban poor and articulating their (the poor’s) collective grievances. The thesis advanced by Cheeseman and Hinfelaar (2010) and Cheeseman and Larmer (2015) that populists combine ethnic mobilization with populist appeals to urban dwellers has credence in the case of Sata but may not hold in the cases of Odinga and Malema. In the Kenyan case, the salience of ethnicity has meant that ethnic mobilization is an important populist strategy, as even urban dwellers are mobilized along ethnic lines. A study of the voting patterns in the 2007 elections reports that, even in the urban constituencies of Nairobi, ODM voters tended to come from Raila Odinga’s ethnic group, Luo. However, to ensure that his party was well positioned to challenge for power, Odinga used the Pentagon strategy of deploying ethnic patrons from non-Luo ethnic regions.

In the case of Malema, the highly urbanized and industrialized nature of South African society makes populist campaigns targeting the urban marginalized poor easy. Malema capitalized on South Africa’s long history of urban radicalism and workers’ protests and utilized ANC networks, especially the ones he nurtured when he was the ANC Youth League president before his expulsion from the party (Vincent 2011). Using militant populist language and tapping into the ANC support base, the EFF is challenging the ANC’s hold on power, with some commentators suggesting that the ANC may be forced to enter a coalition government for the first time after the 2024 elections or not long thereafter (Brooks 2022; Southall 2022).

CONCLUSION

Much of the populism literature from Africa suffers from two major weaknesses. The first weakness is a focus on the supply side (including detachment to traditional parties, linking populism to multi-party democracy) and demand side (including economic grievances) drivers of populism, to the neglect of individual agency. As the above examples of different leaders, across the continent and historical periods, have shown, populism in Africa ultimately relies

on a charismatic leader who taps into grievances. All three factors – the structural, economic and personal – are needed to understand when and how populism emerges (Sishuwa 2024).

The second weakness is the assumption that populism emerged recently, following the return to multi-party democracy, beginning in the early 2000s. This chapter has demonstrated that populism has deeper roots on the continent, starting in the late-colonial period of the 1950s and early 1960s. The limited literature that discusses populism in Africa prior to the reintroduction of multi-party politics focuses on leaders such as Sankara in Burkina Faso, Rawlings in Ghana, and Museveni in Uganda, who all assumed public office not through competitive elections – the currency of populism – but the barrel of the gun. The extent to which these historical figures could be said to be populist is debatable since they not only assumed power militarily but also because some of them moved swiftly to ban elections and political competition in the aftermath.

There is no doubt, however, that populism's roots in Africa predate both the multi-party and one-party state eras. This has been established in this chapter and indeed elsewhere (Rothchild and Gyimah-Boadi 1989; Sishuwa 2024).

Future research could focus on how populists in Africa's multi-party democracies govern after winning power. It would also be worth examining the ethical dimensions of the relationship between populism and democracy in a critical manner that engages with our own positionality as researchers. Some of the elements of populism are essential to the survival of democracy. For instance, populism is often constructed at the ideational level as the fostering of direct links between the leader and the masses. This seems to be equally an essential element of democracy and of populism and prompts us to identify any difference between the two – if there is one. Resnick (2019) argues that 'while leaders who engage in such practices may be ideological, they can also be opportunistic'. Is the dishonesty of opportunism the defining element of populism that distinguishes it from democracy, and should populism therefore be regarded as a dishonest or degenerate form of democracy? This consideration still does not take us very far in defining populism, since we may find opportunism and various other forms of deception in all political systems and actors, whether democratic or not.

Another fundamental dimension in both democracy and populism is the charisma of the leader, which is almost an essential quality in any successful democratic leader, who cannot lead by force and fright and is instead required to have an appealing and sociable personality which enables them to connect with the ordinary people who have to provide the leader with votes, support and approval. Again, this raises questions about the difference between populism and democracy. Prevalent in much of the literature on populism in Africa and elsewhere is the idea that the populist uses inappropriate unconventional language and behaviour to appear as one of the people and therefore working for the people (Ostiguy 2017; Resnick 2010a). Isn't this precisely what a democratic leader is supposed to be doing? And how did this leader suddenly get labelled a populist?

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PART VIII

RESEARCH CHALLENGES

38. Gender, feminism and populism

Luciana Cadahia

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I propose, first of all, to reconstruct the different approaches from which a field of study dedicated to reflecting on the link between gender, feminism and populism has been configured. One of these approaches belongs to the field of comparative politics, mostly developed in the Global North, and is organized from an empirical-descriptive perspective, anchored in a minimal definition of populism. Mostly inspired by the conceptualization offered by Cas Mudde (2004), these studies are predominantly interested in surveying very dissimilar political experiences in order to locate a common set of defining characteristics among different populist experiences. Thus, they link populist experiences in Latin America to those in Northern Europe or Eastern Europe (to cite a few examples), both on the political left and right.

The second approach, mostly emanating from Latin American political thought (e.g. Biglieri and Cadahia 2021), proposes a more heterodox viewpoint, where the empirical plane goes hand in hand with theoretical explorations linked with the problem of emancipation. What I will try to show is the fruitful tension that exists between these two different approaches. While the first assumes a position of exteriority with respect to populism, starting from a position that aspires to evaluative neutrality in its appreciation of the object studied, the second registers an overlap between theory and praxis. Put another way: the latter approach assumes the impossibility of a neutral distance between the theoretical position and the subject under examination. Furthermore, this second perspective also assumes a theoretical and practical commitment to populist theory.

The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I specifically discuss the emergence of a debate on gender and populism within comparative political science. In the second, I elaborate a critique of this point of view, which I will describe as normative, deploying, instead, a historical-political line of inquiry. In the third section, I survey the field of studies on populism and gender within Latin American political thought, highlighting the tensions between feminist theory and populism (in order to make explicit the possibility of a rapprochement between the two theoretical traditions).

Finally, and linking antagonistic feminism with populism, I explore the work of different Latin American authors interested in thinking, on the one hand, of the possibility of a feminist ‘people’ and, on the other, a feminism related to sexual diversity as a condition of possibility to continue exploring – from a theoretical and empirical approach committed to emancipation – an alternative to neoliberalism, both within the field of knowledge production and at the level of political praxis within society.

GENDER AND POPULISM THROUGH COMPARATIVE POLITICS: A NEW FIELD OF RESEARCH

When we ask ourselves about the link between gender studies and populism research, we encounter very different positions that range from a reflexive denial of the said relationship to a simple empirical study of their connections (and/or disconnections) and, at the forefront, an interest in constructing a theoretical articulation between both research traditions and the sensibilities involved in them. Yet, before engaging with an analysis of each position, it should be noted that this whole terrain itself is relatively recent. It has only been around a decade since this research field crystallized.

Now, the interpretations considered ‘canonical’ within the field come from the study of comparative politics. Among the pioneering texts, one could mention the handbook *Gender and Populism in Latin America* (Kampwirth 2010)¹ and the dossier ‘Gender and Populist Radical-Right Politics’ published in the journal *Patterns of Prejudice* (Spierings et al. 2015). In her introduction to *Gender and Populism in Latin America*, the editor, Karen Kampwirth, draws a distinction between the ‘classic’ populist experiences from the first half of the twentieth century, the ‘neopopulism’ of the 1990s and the ‘radical’ populism of the twenty-first century, all situated in Latin America. By classic populism, Kampwirth refers to the best-known populist experiences that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century: Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico, Getulio Vargas in Brazil and Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina. Neopopulism, in contrast, refers to the neoliberal populisms of the 1990s, characteristic of Fujimori in Peru or Menem in Argentina. Finally, radical populism is an expression borrowed from Hugo Chávez himself to refer to the populism developed during the so-called ‘Pink Tide’ era. Against this empirical background, Kampwirth brings together texts by a set of specialists interested in studying, on the one hand, the role of women during these different populist periods and, on the other, the concomitant incorporation (or exclusion) of the different feminist demands that emerged in the so-called feminist waves in Latin America and the Caribbean.²

For its part, the *Patterns of Prejudice* dossier centres on researching the links between gender and so-called populist radical right parties (PRRP) mainly in Europe. While the authors recognize precedents of this kind of study – like the circle of German-speaking political scientists led by Erwin Scheuch and Hans-Georg Betz,³ the works of Helga Amesberger and Brigitte Halbmayr and Cas Mudde’s book, *Populist Radical Parties in Europe* (2007) – the dossier presents the first systematic investigation with an interest in opening a distinct field of study dedicated to accounting empirically for the links between right-wing populism and gender in Europe and focusing on three aspects: (1) ideology; (2) politicians and political leaders; and (3) voters (Spierings et al. 2015: 3).

A field of research labelled ‘populism studies’ has already been established within comparative politics, bringing together two very different geopolitical regions: the extensive legacy of the popular-national experiences in Latin America and the rise of far-right parties, mainly in Western/Eastern Europe, when examining the issue of gender. The effort to unite these two geographical areas, Latin America and Europe, under a single field of study – *populism and gender* – can be found not only in the important contributions by Mudde (2004), but also in the work of Sahar Abi-Hassan (2017). Abi-Hassan identifies ‘three major topics at the intersection of gender and populism: populist supporters, populist gendered representation, and the subordination of personal (gender) identity in populist discourse’ (Abi-Hassan 2017: 428). Based on each of these thematic clusters, Abi-Hassan amasses empirical evidence collected from

Latin America and Europe in a bid to situate the issue of gender within the framework of populism. Findings from the aforementioned studies point to a rather disparaging interpretation of populist experiences. Even though they do recognize a broadening of women's participation and the recognition of many of their demands during populist mobilizations, they nonetheless assume that it will all end up being instrumentalized by populism to serve the leader's ends (Abi-Hassan 2017; Kampwirth 2010; Spierings et al. 2015): 'These struggles in Latin America coincided with the emergence of classical populism, where charismatic leaders *appropriated* female suffrage as an issue of the nation and the "people"' (Abi-Hassan 2017: 429, emphasis added).

Which is to say, the aforementioned studies lean toward the thesis that populism ends up driving forward conservative values about women, which would be to the detriment of the global feminist agenda or, in the case of extreme right-wing parties, would facilitate a deliberately anti-feminist agenda. Furthermore, these kinds of interpretation have inspired more recent works like those by Julia Roth (2020), Alfonso García Figueroa (2021: 119–136) and Bice Maiguashca (2019: 768–785), that posit a clear inconsistency between feminism and populism. Even if each text is highlighting and was conditioned by a different experience – namely, Roth studies the advance of right-wing populism in places that are relatively understudied, like the United States or Latin America, and García Figueroa centres on the concrete experience of the left-wing populism endorsed by Podemos in Spain – it is clear that, whether from the left or the right, feminism appears to be neutralized, rejected or instrumentalized within populist experiences. However, when we pay attention to public policies during different populist governments, we discover that a series of first-order feminist demands were actually satisfied, making the (positive) effect on the lives of millions of women (especially from underprivileged popular sectors) undeniable.

There are many examples that can help in reflecting on the articulation between populism and feminist demands, which are associated with gender identities, free time for women, reproductive rights and economic improvements. To cite some concrete examples associated with each area from the last few years, we could mention: the project for a new constitution in Chile, where women's and other rights are to be recognized; the legalization of same-sex couples' marriage and the gender identity law during the government of Cristina Kirchner; the issuance of non-binary documents during the government of Alberto Fernández in Argentina; the demand for gender parity in the legislative system during the government of Evo Morales in Bolivia; and the incorporation of transgender people's representatives in important positions during Gustavo Petro's local government in Bogotá, Colombia's capital city. It is also worth highlighting the law guaranteeing sexual freedom introduced by Irene Montero in Spain; the legalization of domestic work in Ecuador during the government of Rafael Correa; the creation of nurseries in popular neighbourhoods proposed by Petro; the Universal Child Allowance that was established in 2009 in Argentina by Cristina Kirchner (considered a kind of basic income offered to mothers who are heads of households); and the legalization of abortion in recent decades by governments all across Latin America.

TENSIONS IN THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE: NORMATIVE AND HISTORICAL-POLITICAL FOCI

Despite the novelty that this new field of work represents, it seems to encounter an old problem that affects all empirical studies of populism (Laclau 2005: 4). In fact, one is entitled to ask what precise notion of populism are these investigations putting forward and what kind of intelligibility does this produce in thinking the political when we encompass, subsumed under a single category (populism), experiences as dissimilar as the government of Cristina Kirchner in Argentina and its implementation of many feminist demands, that of Donald Trump in the United States with his misogynist statements against women or Isabel Díaz Ayuso's tenure as president of the Community of Madrid and her positions that discriminate against sexual diversity. How is research rigour advanced when we see Greece's Golden Dawn together with SYRIZA and Spain's Vox together with Podemos, all described as expressions of a single political phenomenon called 'populism'? Indeed, how does placing the popular (pluri)national experiences of Latin America at the same level as those of the European far right help us to understand the construction of gender (masculine/feminine) and the trope of feminist struggles in the two settings? This is what some scholars like Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser seem to suggest in their text dedicated to populism and gender in Northern Europe and South America (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2015). However, some European political experiences such as SYRIZA in Greece, Podemos in Spain or Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party in the United Kingdom, all self-proclaimed inheritors of Latin America's 'Pink Tide', have assumed their own feminist agendas as a response to the advance of extreme right-wing political parties.

As Ernesto Laclau notes:

the impasse that political theory experiences in relation to populism is far from coincidental: the root lies in the limitations of the ontological tools that are currently available for political analysis. As the site of a roadblock to theory, 'populism' reflects some of the inherent limitations in the way political theory has addressed the question of how social agents 'totalize' the set of their political experience. (Laclau 2005: 4)

Is it consistent and productive to continue studying progressive movements alongside extreme right-wing movements as expressions of a single political phenomenon without problematizing the ontological quagmire we seem to be in? Where does this supposed 'unit' of analysis (populism) reside, and how does it channel our research perspectives on contemporary geopolitics?⁴ Furthermore, we should ask if this unit can even be minimally upheld, since the very texts previously cited explicitly acknowledge how challenging it is to establish, under this theory, some general characteristics concerning specifically the issue of gender, the leadership of women and the role of the feminist movement within populist experiences (Abi-Hassan 2017: 440–442; Kampwirth 2010: 14–18). What notion of populism is being offered, after all, by this branch of comparative politics within political science?

An aspect yet to be discussed is that the majority of the aforementioned texts offer the same characterization of populism as an ideology, based on Mudde's work (Abi-Hassan 2017: 427; Kantola and Lombardo 2021: 561–564; Spierings et al. 2015: 3–10). Although Mudde, a specialist in the phenomenon of European right-wing political parties after the reconstruction of democracies in the post-war era, has often highlighted the secondary operation of populism within – predominantly nativist – radical right parties, the overall reception of his work seems to imply a stronger – almost exclusive – association between populism and the far right. This,

in addition to overdetermining the meaning of the phenomena characterized as populist, also conditions the kind of linkage that would come to be established between gender studies, feminist struggles and the occurrence of populism. Does this not then establish, beforehand and without a proper conceptual reflection, a relationship of externality between populism and feminism? Why would it be advantageous to make this association and disconnect the far right from the persistence and regeneration of fascist values? Let us rather focus on the definition that these authors pick up from Mudde, for whom populism is ‘an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’ (Mudde 2004: 543). Here, one can see that the ideological dimension of populism lies in the division of society into two opposing groups characterized as ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’. Besides noting that this characterization would, more or less, label political theories like those of Aristotle or Machiavelli as ‘populist’, there are two interesting observations to be made.

On the one hand, what does ideology mean here? Manipulation? Falsity? A particular interpretation of facts? What unspoken, implicit connotations are energized when a field of knowledge, which is assumed to be objective and neutral, attributes the moniker of ‘ideology’ to a specific political experience? On the other hand, to the distinction between ‘the people’ and the ‘elite’, Mudde adds the adjectives ‘pure’ and ‘corrupt’, such that the political antagonism between people and elite appears to give way to an antagonism between purity and corruption (or impurity), much closer to normative valuations that would give way to immunizing operations of exclusion. One would have to ask if these adjectives help us to reflect on the political or if, on the contrary, they end up distorting it, creating a set of equivalent, abstract labels – pure/corrupt – introducing thus significant difficulties for thinking through the historical build-up that, upon being organized around the figure of the people, organizes correlated efforts to expand rights, participate in political life and disrupt mechanisms of inequality and divestment. Are the expressions ‘pure people’ and ‘corrupt elite’ enough to explain the historical arrangements that have given way to the antagonism between those at the top and those at the bottom?

Let’s not forget that, as Mudde himself admits, ‘liberal democracies’ constitute the normative horizon from which this sub-field of political science thinks populism (Mudde 2004: 542). Despite the fact that Mudde rejects the idea of populism as a ‘normal pathology of western democracies’ (Mudde 2004: 541), his point of view for thinking populism continues to depend on a given normative understanding of democracy as well as on a concern that ‘the explanations of and reactions to the current populist *Zeitgeist* are seriously flawed and might actually strengthen rather than weaken it’ (Mudde 2004: 542). All that would seem to end up reproducing a rather biased, evaluatively conditioned reading – prioritizing a priori the perspective of liberal democracy – at the expense of a populist point of view. The ambivalence of his attitude resides in the way it conducts that description itself. Thus, there is an invisible pre-existing comprehensive and evaluative model through which to address the ‘populist fact’. One could argue that this way of thinking populism, though it would not extend to all cases, seems to inherit the prejudices of positivism: it elevates a ‘fact’ into a neutral space that obscures the political position of whoever shapes the very means of describing *the thing* – and as a result, of constructing the fact itself.

At the same time, one would have to ask what it implies for gender and populism studies to reproduce this point of view of liberal democracy as an external yet evaluatively conditioned

perspective for thinking about a phenomenon as complex as the role of women, the configuration of feminism and the symbolic constructions of the feminine and the masculine within populist experiences.

POPULISM THROUGH FEMINIST THEORIES: AUTONOMIST VERSUS ANTAGONISTIC

Within the same period that the study of comparative politics begins to foster this perspective within political science, one can observe the emergence of another strategy of addressing the link between gender studies and populism. It is worth highlighting that this alternative approach comes, mostly, from the field of Latin American political thought, whose principle characteristics are to abandon the externalized point of view that sees populism as an ideology and to adopt a Laclauian conceptualization of populism as a form of political articulation that joins together unrelated positions across a political field. That is to say, it abandons the external point of view normatively conditioned by explanatory schemas overdetermined by liberal democracy, which tend to present populism as a hazard to democracy (Biglieri and Cadahia 2021), and proposes a point of view internal to populism in terms of a logic of the political. That is, these theoretical constructions try to inhabit the heart of the populist logic in order to capture what this form of political articulation entails when it takes on the issues of gender and feminism, without establishing evaluative frameworks through which to condition *a priori* the approach to their object of inquiry.

Once more, this is where we find two clearly delimited positions. On the one hand, there are those who assume that populism is antipodal to feminism (Gago 2019; Maiguashca 2019; Roth 2020) and, on the other, those who detect not only a connection between gender studies and populism, but also the possibility of thinking a feminist *people* in a populist key (Biglieri and Cadahia 2021; Di Marco 2019; Nijenshon 2019). Both positions propose another kind of relationship to the production of knowledge. If the study of comparative politics can be characterized as attempting to create the conditions of a supposedly objective description that is exterior to the object of study, the perspectives of this section, in contrast, begin from the assumption that all theoretical constructions within the field of political thought are established from a determined perspectival position. That position inevitably directs and channels research efforts into different directions. It could be said that, just as the study of comparative politics finds itself permeated by a liberal democratic normative framework as the desirable horizon for contemporary politics, so too the positions developed below are organized around the idea of popular emancipation as the horizon of meaning from which to think the political. Let us now expand on each of these perspectives.

If we ask ourselves about the distance/discord between certain feminist currents and populism, it would seem that the refusal to engage with each other has been typical of particular traditions that are present both in Latin America (autonomists, communitarians and/or Spinozists) and in Europe (associated with theories of sexual difference themselves) (Braidotti 2004). Autonomist feminism here refers to post-Marxist feminist perspectives that formulate emancipation through contemporary rereadings of power, desire and the common in Spinoza (found in authors like Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri or Gilles Deleuze). This group also encompasses authors who work on communitarian feminism as an alternative to the colonial legacy. Now, both post-Marxist feminism and communitarian feminism tend to establish

a whole series of antagonisms that seem to define, in advance, what would be and/or would not be a site conducive to emancipation. Thus, the state, representation, political parties, the figure of the leader and confrontation, on the one hand, tend to remain on the side of abstraction and patriarchy and, on the other, common life, immanence, new feminist forms of organizing and the body remain on the side of emancipatory feminism. Another shared characteristic between *European difference feminism* and Latin American *autonomist feminism* would be their affirmative conception of desire, which distances itself from desire as something related to negativity in the Hegelian, Lacanian or even in the populist tradition.

Without looking further, Verónica Gago, in her latest book, *La potencia feminista (Feminist Power)*, contrasts the populist articulation with the feminist dynamic, arguing that in ‘feminist struggles there is an anti-neoliberal perspective with an ability to go beyond the populist political articulation’ (Gago 2019: 209). To be able to sustain this view, Gago equates feminist struggles with the true autonomy of assembly dynamics and ascribes an affirmative and expansive power to them that overruns populist theory’s aspirations to articulate different political demands. However, many of the demands typical of feminist assemblies have as their goal a transformation of the state and the institutions, since the demands are addressed to the state and require the state to comply with them. This is observed, for example, in the mobilizations to request the legalization of abortion in Chile, Mexico or Argentina – even the mobilizations against femicide and the demand for a greater presence of the state to take care of the lives of women and prevent this type of murder.

FROM POPULAR FEMINISM TO THE FEMINIST PEOPLE

In contrast to these positions, which are a priori critical towards populist theory and practice, there is also a substantial body of work directed toward thinking, on the one hand, gender studies and populism together from a perspective of political articulation and, on the other, the importance of articulating populism and feminism in building a more feminist *people*. Among the pioneering authors in this field we find the work of Graciela Di Marco, who explores the populist experience in Argentina as a space for inscribing a feminist *people* (Di Marco 2010). This idea reveals two distinct movements that seem antithetical to the very widespread thesis (in the study of comparative politics) that such an operation is bound to instrumentalize, neutralize or even subsume feminism within the signifier of ‘the people’, or the leader (Di Marco 2010: 51). In other words: although the people is by no means reduced to feminism, it plays a central role in its current articulation. Following this, the author presents a historical construction of the Argentinean women’s movement organized across three fronts: participation in human rights movements, collective action by women from popular sectors and the articulations between women’s demands within the feminist movement. She then demonstrates how all these fronts have organized themselves and shaped the popular field in Argentina to the point of overdetermining the way that ‘the people’, as a collective subject, gets configured. Thus, the author avoids bending her research towards a normative evaluation (pure/impure); instead, she reflects on how feminism effectively transforms the popular articulation. This allows her to discover a heterogeneity of classes that isn’t often taken into account, since the encounter between middle-class feminist movements and the organizations of women from the popular classes gives shape to a feminism capable of articulating a feminist people, in

the sense that the various demands of feminism begin to overdetermine the articulation of the popular (Di Marco 2010: 61).

Work put forward by Gloria Perelló, Paula Biglieri and Luciana Cadahia operates in a similar manner. In their work, specifically through the confluence of psychoanalytic and populist theory, Biglieri and Perelló (2019) register the ontological transformations that the very logic of the political has been undergoing due to the incursion of feminist experiences like NiUnaMenos ('Not one [woman] less') in Latin America. In their book *Seven Essays on Populism*, Biglieri and Cadahia dedicate a chapter to thinking the configuration of the feminist popular field, the transformation that this implies for the construction of a non-neoliberal popular institutionalality and the disruptive character of antagonist women leaders transmitting statements like 'The homeland is the other' (*La patria es el otro*),⁵ as put by Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (Biglieri and Cadahia 2021: 115–132).

Such analyses conflict with a large number of studies within comparative politics and their shared thesis that, despite signalling an incursion of women into the political field, in most cases populist experiences lean towards a reinforcement of traditional patriarchal values. Thus, they distance themselves from the gender dichotomy that certain feminist currents seem to promote (when they identify, on the one hand, the feminine with the reconciliation of the community or the possibility of a common life – through care or the affective and expansive encounter between bodies – and, on the other, the masculine with conflict, antagonism and hierarchy).

The big issue in addressing care through the assemblarian or the communitarian (Gago 2019) rests in that this affirmative expansion neither explains how these articulations get produced nor to what degree they are indebted to the internal conflict that organizes them, and most important, it would appear to lack political imagination and solidarity with other agents of political struggle. This is as if they were reiterating an assumption about subjects with a privileged position vis-à-vis emancipation – as if the unions or the state were the bad habits of a bygone era. In addition, what is most complicated is that it is as if they assume that the struggles of other subjects or agents would detrimentally contaminate true emancipation. Biglieri and Cadahia suggest that instead of focusing on the discovery of privileged sites (or subjects) for social transformation, the focus, following from Nancy Fraser, should be on political praxis as a way to reinvent the distinction between reproduction (care) and life and production (work) of a social value, without sacrificing the emancipatory horizon but also without sacrificing the social protection that populist and feminist readings of institutions can offer (Biglieri and Cadahia 2021: 127–132). Furthermore, they propose that the problem is not about the issue of care itself; rather, it is about the autonomist mould – communitarian as well as ontological-affirmative – within which the problem has been approached. In that sense, they reflect on the political role of care from the perspective of antagonistic thought, against the belief that an antagonistic leadership necessarily entails a male leadership, and contending with the belief, typical of a particular form of feminism, that the politicization of the domestic or the communitarian provides the only possible horizon for the political within feminism.

Instead, they offer keys for thinking the heterogeneous character of the popular field and how, little by little, a '*we feminists*' begins to emerge. Mercedes Barros works on this last aspect and defends the thesis that, in the case of Argentina, there is an articulation between the feminist movement and Kirchnerism through the defence of human rights as a space for inscribing a feminist '*we*' that, without the emergence of populist governments, would lack a place and/or outlet (Barros and Martínez 2019). Jenny Gunnarsson Payne and Sofie

Tornhill (2019) demonstrate something that isn't always taken into account when one thinks the advance of the anti-feminist right, namely the role that global corporations play and their paradoxical complicity with the 'progressive' neoliberalism of gender equality in creating the conditions for the emergence of far-right experiences in Europe and Latin America. That is to say, they show that the question of populism (left/right) cannot be dissociated from the more structural question of neoliberalism and corporate power (Di Marco 2019: 61–76). In tune with this work, which incorporates the issue of neoliberalism in populism studies, Malena Nijensohn (2019: 145–150) suggests that it should be clear that there is no single way of understanding the feminist movement, and that some aspects of a certain feminist agenda tend to reproduce neoliberalism's current mechanisms of inequality against those that fight against certain populist experiences. In her recent work (Nijensohn 2019: 145–158), she highlights a tension between a neoliberal feminist tradition that tends to think of the body as private property and, as such, transforms feminism into a mere struggle for individual autonomy and freedom and, on the other side, a popular feminism that goes beyond individualist and proprietary imaginaries and manages to organize a horizon of collective meaning around the pursuit of social justice (Nijensohn 2019: 154). Thus, she advocates for a feminism that is not centred on the figure of women, but one that is capable of incorporating lesbians, transvestites, trans, bisexuals, non-binary persons, immigrants, etc., whose pluralistic, radical dimension creates the conditions of possibility for an emancipatory, anti-neoliberal movement (Nijensohn 2019: 146–150). This point is important because, within the study of comparative politics, the feminist agenda tends to be thought of – from the perspective of this individualist tradition – as empowering women to transform themselves into their own managers. This results in losing sight of the tension between a liberal (or neoliberal) feminist tradition and a plural, radical feminism of an emancipatory nature that is not always taken into account when reflecting on the connection between gender studies and populism (since feminism tends to be thought of in a more homogenous way and it is assumed, beforehand, that the tensions between populism and feminism always come from the patriarchal nature of the former and not, sometimes, from internal divisions within feminism itself).

In fact, one might consider that all the works cited in this section are intended for thinking, both at the level of theory and that of praxis, a non-external relationship between gender and populism, on the one hand, and the need for an articulation between feminism and populism for constructing an emancipatory project that provides an alternative to neoliberalism, on the other. As Biglieri and Cadahia suggest, it might be more fruitful for populism research to abandon the idea that extreme right-wing movements express typically and automatically some kind of populist ideology or political articulation; it may be time to revise the definition of 'populism' as a renovated reactionary project/experience of a fascist or neofascist nature driving forward an authoritarian neoliberal agenda (Biglieri and Cadahia 2021: 20–40).

CONCLUSION

Over the course of this chapter, we have recounted the emergence of a very fruitful field of research revolving around the links between gender and populism. At the same time, I have highlighted a tension between the approaches put forward by key contributions within comparative politics, on the one hand, and critical political theory, on the other. It can even be suggested that this expresses a contrast between a production of knowledge grounded in

the Global North (comparative politics) and a production of knowledge that comes from the Global South (critical/political theory). Although there may be exceptions and variations in both cases, they certainly seem to reflect a tension between a normative conception and an emancipatory conception of populism when it comes to thinking about its links to gender studies as well as feminist studies. If, in the first case, there is a major tendency to think this through a relationship of exteriority and by interweaving experiences of progressivism and the far right into a single horizon of meaning; in the second case, the transformations that truly take place when organizing a feminist people presenting an alternative to neoliberalism are thought from within populist and feminist theory, whether this means drawing a clear distinction between populism on the right and populism on the left, or directly tying extreme right-wing political experiences to the moniker of fascism.

This brings to light a series of interpretive differences. While from the point of view of the first perspective the study of comparative politics – associated as it is with the idea that populism is an ideology – recognizes the importance of women and many feminists demands within populist experiences, it would seem there is a certain consensus that the feminist agenda ends up being rejected or instrumentalized by populist leaders and significations of ‘the people’. At the same time, a masculine way of acting is reproduced which would reinforce the traditional patriarchal values assigned to them. From the point of view of the second perspective, in contrast, there is an attempt to think, from within populist logic, the incursion of feminist demands into the articulation of the figure of ‘the people’ and the possibility, from the bottom up, of gradually undoing patriarchal structures of domination. This allows us to discern a heterogeneous field emerging between the bad habits of patriarchy and the feminist incursions that could be transforming the popular field. The degree of this would be such that, instead of an instrumentalization of feminism by populism, one could observe an over-determination of the construction of different popular demands by feminism. Likewise, these works help in thinking how the antagonistic leadership of women does not necessarily entail a repetition of masculine values and, as such, is based on a criticism of a certain notion of care as exterior to conflict and the construction of antagonistic power. Furthermore, feminism appeals to antagonistic practices (against patriarchy) to transform social reality. Along these lines, there is an insistence on the heterogeneous nature of feminism and the tension that exists between a liberal (or neoliberal) feminism, more grounded in the figure of autonomy and the property rights of the entrepreneurial individual, and a popular feminism of a collective nature grounded in broader struggles for social justice. This distinction allows us, on the one hand, to make a critique of particular feminist agendas prone to remaining aligned with neoliberalism and facilitating the empowerment of certain women only within a corporate capitalist structural framework. And, on the other, to study how the link between feminism and populism allows us to: (1) question the masculine and feminine figures; (2) expand the demands of sexual diversities within the popular field; and (3) demonstrate the antagonism that exists between the feminist people and the neoliberal agenda.

NOTES

1. Although, as already noted, this field of study was consolidated only a decade ago, it is possible to trace some important texts reflecting on the link between gender and populism beforehand. See, for example, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and the studies of extreme right-wing (populist) parties, gender roles and ‘gender ideology’ written by Amesberger and Halbmayr (2002).

2. It is important to note that, just as differences have been established between periodized waves in Europe and the United States, specific waves in Latin America and the Caribbean have also been noted. For a more detailed analysis of the periodization of the Latin American waves and their specific characteristics, see Cadahia (2021) and Rivera Berruz (2018).
3. It is interesting to note that the use of the term 'right-wing populism' begins with the expression 'radical right-wing populism' as used by Hans-Georg Betz to describe certain right-wing parties in Eastern Europe (Betz 1994). Likewise, Betz supports this with the expression 'right-wing radicalism' (Scheuch and Klingemann 1967), used in the 1960s to refer to how right-wing parties were shaped by their experience of the Second World War. All of this helps to support the observation that the expression 'right-wing radicalism' used by Scheuch in the 1960s to think about Eastern Europe would be replaced in the 1990s with the expression 'radical right-wing populism' (Mudde 2004).
4. By geopolitics I refer to this geographical partition of populist studies that, on the one hand, ends up having political effects and, on the other, delimits the geographically relevant ways of thinking about political problems.
5. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner used the phrase 'The homeland is the other' in 2013 in a speech referring to solidarity actions by populist militants in the face of serious flooding in the city of La Plata in the Buenos Aires province.

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39. Populism and religion

Konstantinos Papastathis

INTRODUCTION

The relation between religion and populism might be, in principle, characterized as *sui generis*. On the one hand, religion is often equated with the *ancien regime*, reflecting a traditionalist value frame as well as obsolete patterns of social thinking. For instance, a basic axiom of Christian political theology is that the primary agent of sovereignty is God, who ascribes the authority to a king to exercise absolute power without being accountable to any political body or his people, the so-called ‘divine right of the king’. On the other hand, populism is a product of modernity; its basic tenet is that power belongs to the ‘people’, advocating a rupture with established institutions within society and, as a result, standing for political change. In short, ‘populist movements are a secular phenomenon while religious ones clearly, are not’ (Arato and Cohen 2017: 283). Still, despite their innate tensions, religion and populism have been closely linked, since, for example, populist parties have extensively employed religious conceptual and stylistic patterns or symbols and instrumentally used religion, either in the form of clericalism or anti-clericalism, as an ideological feature of their discourses.

In this regard, the conceptualization of the political subject of populism, i.e. ‘the people’, is of special importance, since, in many cases, religion is defined as a feature of its identity. For many Islamic populist actors, for instance, religion forms the basis on which the populist divide is created, since Muslim faith is a prerequisite for someone to acquire the ‘one of us’ status, while the secularized social strata or non-Muslims are identified with a hostile Western colonialism. Moreover, Islam might also be represented as the platform for restoring social justice and fixing economic inequalities, while populist leaders, in some cases, might even identify their rule with religious figures of the glorious past to draw symbolic capital and frame their discourse as reflecting the collective will (Yilmaz et al. 2021: 4–7).

Of special interest is also the strong link between populism and religion in the United States, especially regarding the community of evangelical Christians. The political narrative of the affiliated Tea Party, which blended a type of nationalism, conservatism and economic libertarianism employing religious language, symbols and images, is revealing here. The same evangelical constituency supported Trump, whose populist platform was in turn structured on an ‘America first’ nativist frame and a ‘Christian people versus secular elites’ cleavage. Similarly, Christian Zionist messianism, based on the eschatological idea that the second coming of Christ is linked to support for the state of Israel, seems to have a wide appeal among the evangelical electoral body, playing a special role in Trump’s vote-seeking agenda (Yilmaz et al. 2021: 18–19). This, however, does not entail a theologization of politics, but rather the politicization of religious premises since the communication agendas of populist actors and the subsequent effects on policymaking are essentially related to political competition.

On the other hand, within the ‘people versus elite’ axis, instead of being framed in nativist terms as a constituent part of ‘the people’, the invocation of religion by a populist actor might alternatively be used for defining its antithesis. This might be the case of left-wing populist

parties, which traditionally portray religious bureaucracies as part of the elite or, at least, as being at its service, while viewing the religious value frame and theology as reflecting power relations within society, being a propaganda mechanism and a legitimizing tool for maintaining economic and social inequalities. However, the stance of left populist parties vis-à-vis religion might be seen as the result of a multitude of factors, not limited to ideology. The secularization process, the high or low effect of the religiosity cleavage within electoral politics or the electoral score and the possibility of forming a new government are significant factors, among others, which, in one way or another, may affect the agenda of any populist actor on religion, regardless of its initial political planning. For instance, the Greek SYRIZA was a fervent pro-secular party at the time it struggled to reach the electoral threshold and enter parliament, but when transformed into a catch-all party it followed a neutral handling of religious affairs, without disputing the Church's prevalent social and political status in Greece (Papastathis 2016: 83–84). In short, the actual place of religion within populist discourse does not seem to be structurally non-volatile, but rather flexible, instrumental and contingent. Moreover, it is not only political populist actors that employ religion but religious agents that have also articulated a populist discourse as well, when communicating their politicized religious platform as the cause of 'the people of God' against secularized elites (e.g. the case of the Church of Greece discussed by Stavrakakis 2004), or the blending of liberation theology with social movements in Latin America (Gounopoulos 2020).

The present chapter attempts to map this relation, focusing particularly on the populist radical right (PRR) discourse on religion, in European Union established democracies (pertaining to both *old* and *post-communist* political systems). To this end, it studies the conceptualization of religion by the party family and the place of religious themes within their discourse via capturing the position of core religious social and moral values within the parties' ideological structure. The criterion for selecting the parties under investigation was not their inclusion within the broad PRR party family, but their populist ideological/discursive profile as well as their parliamentary representation. In this respect, the chapter draws on the PopuList dataset (Rooduijn et al. 2019). These parties are: Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ, Austria); Flemish Interest (VB, Belgium); Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD, Czech Republic); Danish People's Party (DF, Denmark); National Front (FN, France/currently Rassemblement National); Alternative for Germany (AfD, Germany); Greek Solution (EL, Greece); Fidesz-Hungarian Civil Alliance (Fidesz, Hungary); Jobbik, the Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik, Hungary); Lega (Nord) (LN, Italy); Party for Freedom (PVV, Netherlands); Law and Justice (PiS, Poland); Slovakia National Party (SNS, Slovakia); Voice (VOX, Spain); Sweden Democrats (SD, Sweden); and Swiss People's Party (SVP, Switzerland). The data analysed derive from party documents (e.g. manifestos) and the relevant secondary literature. In the next sections, I explore the conceptualization and utilization of the religious agenda by the parties under study. Finally, I summarize the conclusions, noting some further (open) questions related to the theme under investigation.

THE POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT DISCOURSE ON RELIGION

In line with the idea that modern political concepts are 'secularized theological ones' (Schmitt 1996: 36) or that at least some of them, such as territory ('sacred homeland') or population ('the people'), can be 'theologized' (Arato 2013: 143), it might be argued that the employment

of a theological language and imagery often form a feature of populist representations. Certain scholars, belonging to the ideational school within populism research, take a step forward, arguing that the moral dimension forms a *conditio sine qua non* in identifying a particular social/political actor as populist *per se*. What is central here is the very idea that society is ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups ('the people' versus 'the elite'; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012), which are mainly portrayed, as collective subjects, in moral terms, employing the religious-founded Manichean 'good against evil' scheme, where the former are defined as the pure underdogs and the latter as corrupt. In this way, a group of an altogether secular character is perceived as the absolute agent of the holy, while its hostile other as impure and, as such, by definition, as condemned. In effect, the transcendent sovereign 'people' incarnate the vision for social restructuring via their emancipation from the establishment constituting, thus, a collective agent of 'salvation', while, in a parallel process, populism as reflecting the 'volonté générale' acquires the form of a politicized messianism. In brief, the 'sacred people' is viewed as a unified body (DeHanas and Shterin 2018: 179), whose mission, 'the promise of a better world through action by the sovereign people' (Canovan 1999: 12), is its own political redemption (Panizza 2013: 114).

On the other hand, for proponents of a discursive approach, the framing of populism in moral terms seems to be more of an open question rather than an established thesis. In particular, it is suggested that moralism should not be viewed as a core feature of populism, since the divide between 'the people' and 'the elite' actually reflects antagonistic social interests; as such, it has a predominantly political character rather than a moral one. In addition, it is argued, employing moralistic schemes to define an ideology/discourse is not confined to populism, but applies to a broader variety of social movements and actors, which implicitly or explicitly label their political opponents along moral lines, i.e. as evil/corrupted, etc. (Katsambekis 2022). Therefore, moralism cannot be a core element of populism as it could be associated with many other ideologies or discourses. At best, the relationship is instrumental. In brief, morality does not seem to be related to what populism is, but to how populism is sometimes represented or invoked. This is because the empty signifier 'the people' needs to be conceptualized in a distinct way in order to acquire substantive content and construct a convincing moral claim to trigger and justify self-righteous indignation and action against the establishment (Arato and Cohen 2017: 291). Therefore, the conceptualization and the use of morality by populist agents is 'open' and might take various forms. Accordingly, the process of portraying religion as a salient imagery/identity/historical background is perpetually flexible and contingent and, as detailed below, its employment differs through time and space, depending on the socio-political context. At any rate, in proportion to the symbolic operations taking place within political competition, the imagery employed by populists could be drawn, in some cases, from religious resources. For example, although charismatic leadership is not generally considered to be a core feature of populism, the populist leader is often viewed and/or communicated as a secularized form of the religious ideal types of the prophet, the moral archetype, the missionary and the martyr (Zúquete 2017: 455–457).

The populism–religion nexus might be divided into 'overt' and 'covert' forms. Despite the extensive overlap between them, the former case refers to the 'sacralization of the political', i.e. it occurs when the employment of religion by a populist political agent is more latent and indirect; the latter to the 'politicization of the sacred', i.e. it takes place when the use of religion is open and direct (Peker and Laxer 2021: 326). In a similar vein, it has been argued that in terms of rhetoric, European populism refers to religion in two basic formats: (1) the

‘civilizationist’ format, which applies to various versions within Western Europe (Brubaker 2017); and (2) the ‘devout and conservative immersion format’ (Hedetoft 2020: 104), which applies, more or less, to Eastern European parties in which nationalism, instead of civilizationism, acquires a central place. In the latter category, we might also include the Greek PRR, as well as the parties from Balkan countries of an Eastern Orthodox tradition, such as Bulgaria or Serbia. What matters is that, in both formats, populism employs religion to further identitarian politics, providing meaning to ‘populism as a political theology in its own right, an “ideology” that is truly “thin” on the rational side of politics, but “deep” as a credo of belonging’; transforming, thus, the question of the place of religion in populist discourse as a belief or belonging into a question of ‘believing in belonging’ (Hedetoft 2020: 109–111).

THE POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT AND RELIGION IN WESTERN EUROPE

PRR parties in Europe have used religion as a key dimension of their platform since the turn of the millennium, even though most of them did not previously have any religious roots or agenda. Actually, some of them had previously viewed the Church institution as an ally of the hostile establishment (FPÖ), or even followed a pro-pagan stance in line with their fascist legacies (LN). However, the current employment of religion in the most secularized region of the world by the party family is not a paradox, but follows the development of new forms of collective identity. Today, a PRR party might proclaim its faith authenticity or its secular orientation, it might ‘believe without belonging’, ‘belong without believing’ or a mix of all the above. What matters is that, in any case, it uses religion first and foremost as a marker of authentic identity, associated with ‘the people’. In effect, the belief is transformed into belonging, regardless of the religious or secular character of the party. Here, Christianity can be viewed as ‘cultural Christianity’ (Hennig and Hidalgo 2021: 51–57).

However, the appropriation of the religious value frame within PRR discourse has a selective character. They invoke only those elements of the religious pool that are either identical with the party’s own ideas or instrumental to their ends. This strategic employment helps, in turn, to mobilize support and to mainstream their platform (Minkenberg 2018: 535), it serves to socially legitimize their discourse and it is necessary to foster the parties’ transition from niche into catch-all ruling forces, e.g. LN or FPÖ (Hadj-Abdou 2016: 30). First and foremost, however, it defines Islam as the hostile other. Populists ‘hijack’ Christianity as an element for constructing the imagined identity of the European versus the culturally alien Muslim (Marzouki et al. 2016), who is portrayed negatively irrespective of the internal divisions within the religious body between secular, moderates or radical (Schwörer and Romero-Vidal 2020: 13), presenting, thus, as unsustainable the coexistence between people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

This opposition to the Muslim other is not framed only in national, but mainly in ‘civilizational’ terms (Brubaker 2017). Although Western European PRR parties often put emphasis on the national idea, this does not entail a perception of Western Europe as culturally fragmented but rather as homogenous and unified through a shared sense of cultural belonging linked to a distinct way of life, of which Christianity is seen as a central element (in terms of its historical path and its civilizational identity). LN, for example, has committed itself to protecting Europe’s Christian character, representing Muslims as an out-group, simultaneously

denouncing Brussels and the Vatican's pro-immigrant stance (McDonnell 2016: 14–15; Molle 2019: 151–152). AfD celebrates German '*Leitkultur*', a basic feature of which is 'the religious tradition of Christendom' (Hölne and Meireis 2020: 10). Marine Le Pen considers Catholicism an integral part of French identity (Roy 2016a), while the SVP programme defines the Christian faith to be 'of major importance for Switzerland's culture and political landscape' (SVP 2015–2019: 93). For the VB, Europe as a whole 'has to make a choice' on the question of 'western values versus Islamic values' (VB 2008). The previously anti-clerical FPÖ has also described Christianity as the 'foundation of Europe' and focused on the traditions of the 'Occident', which requires a Christianity that defends its values in the face of the Islamic threat (Hafez et al. 2019). In the same vein, DF views religious differences as a 'cultural clash' between Western democracies and Islam. Islam, therefore, is not viewed narrowly as a potential menace to the national wellbeing, but broadly as an existential threat for European 'civilization' per se (Brubaker 2017). The issue at stake is not the re-Christianization of a secularized Europe, but blocking its alleged Islamization (Marzouki et al. 2016). In effect, Christianity is transformed into 'a civilizational and identitarian "Christianism"' (Brubaker 2017: 1199).

It should be noted, however, that the invocation of religion is not in opposition to modernity. The PRR increased its anti-Islam messages, but this cannot be confirmed with regard to its pro-Christian messages (Schwörer and Fernández-García 2021); nor does a Christian identity seem to be a key vote-seeking strategy for the PRR (Schwörer and Romero-Vidal 2020: 17). Not to mention that many parties, such as FN, LN, SVP or SD, are on bad terms with official Church institutions, which are considered to have deviated from the correct order of things, supporting multi-culturalism. To this end, the Church contribution to the *cordon sanitaire* against PRR is a substantial factor as well. The transformation of Christianity into an identitarian 'Christianism' allows these parties to retain secularism and social liberalism as features of their frames (Brubaker 2017). The ensuing frame of 'Christianist secularism' (Brubaker 2016) has resulted in a new discursive articulation, in which Christian religion is not viewed as an anti-modern institution, but its social dominance is welcomed as a condition for fostering the secular operation of society, which is under attack from Islam. The display of Christian symbols is thus supported not in the name of religion but of European culture, disestablishing, in turn, the presence of Muslim symbols in the public sphere as being in principle contrary to the secular profile of European social operations. Therefore, secularizing religion works as a tool for blocking Islam's public visibility.

In the same vein, Western European PRR advocates the right of freedom of expression as a condition *sine qua non* of the European social contract that should be protected regardless of the possible objections posed by the Muslim community. In this regard, they employ specific incidents, such as the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack, to implicitly establish Islam to be, by definition, violent, thus legitimizing their hate speech. In this way, the PRR constructs a new form of collective identity, blurring the distinction between secularity and religious belonging in the name of the European legal culture, which is, in turn, communicated as part of an authentic democratic operation via its opposition to the culturally alien and oppressive Islam. The PVV leader Geert Wilders, for example, has repeatedly made statements against Islam, reproducing the stereotype of a backward religion that promotes violence and clashes with Western civilization, which is identified with the human rights value system. For VB, there exists a dividing line between Europe and Islam, especially when it comes to values such as the equality of men and women, freedom of speech and the separation of church and state. Moreover, it proposes strong law and order policies for combatting the alleged Islamic terrorist

threat (VB 2008). SVP is ‘committed to upholding the Western Christian foundations of our state, legal system and culture’, it stands for the public display of Christian symbols, it calls for the banning of veils and it ‘rejects the recognition of non-Western religious communities as legal entities under public law’ (SVP 2015–2019: 92). Moreover, DF portrays Western culture as the agent of democracy, human rights and gender equality, while Islam is instead identified at its core with fundamentalism and represented as a primitive religion, celebrating an oppressive and misogynistic value system (Meret and Gregersen 2019). Marine Le Pen claims to have ‘strong faith’, but supported the banning of the headscarf as being in principle contrary to *laïcité*, viewed as a pivotal value of French political culture. As Roy argues: ‘Laïcité offers a more appealing and fruitful tool with which to fight “Islam” than a Christian religion whose practice is in steady decline’ (2016a: 80). The support of the religious agenda, therefore, has a selective character, confined to the issues that serve the party’s nativist agenda, but does not extend to issues such as the separation between state and church, which are considered part of the European political culture.

Similarly, a substantial number of PRR parties emphasize an open position vis-à-vis a traditional value setting, prioritizing the European way of life (highlighting its Christian origin) and denouncing the ultra-conservative ethics of Islam. PVV, FN, VB and the Scandinavian parties embrace gender equality and women’s rights, while Islam is viewed at its core as oppressive and misogynistic. Homophobia as part of a traditional ethics agenda does not form anymore an ideological element of PVV and FN, while the Scandinavian parties have cultivated a more tolerant outlook as well; allowing, thus, the party group to accuse Islam of an inherent hostility towards the LGBT community. Here we might again observe the structuring of a discursive articulation in which Christianity is ultimately de-Christianized: the emptying out of its moral content (i.e. family ethics) and its indirect conceptualization (i.e. as the root of European culture and therefore a major contributor to what Europe currently is) seem to serve the very opposite of what it stands for in theological terms. It should be noted, however, that LN, VOX and AfD are differentiated from the party family, being closer to their Eastern European counterparts in this regard. Judging from their platforms and communication strategy, the Brothers of Italy (BI) ruling party seems to belong to this group as well. LN (as well as BI) has been increasingly attached to ultra-conservative Catholic family values, supporting anti-gender and anti-abortion policies (Bolzonar 2021; Ozzano 2019: 73–74), while VOX has set a pro-life agenda, due to its convergence with fundamentalist circles (Schwörer et al. 2021). Last, the AfD has vigorously embraced traditional family values, supporting an anti-abortion legislative agenda (Strube 2020: 133).

This differentiation might also explain why the various PRR parties do not conceptualize ‘the people’ as a collective subject in the same way. The FN views both Christians and secular citizens as members of ‘the people’ in equal terms; for the Swiss and Dutch PRR ‘the people’ are basically secular, but with Christian roots; while for LN (as well as for VOX) being Catholic is a basic criterion for belonging to the Italian (and Spanish) ‘people’ (Perrin 2020: 286–287; Roy 2016b: 186). It should be emphasized that despite the diverse conceptualizations, Christianity forms, in one way or another, a condition for being recognized as part of the national and/or European social body for all parties under discussion; as such, the one presupposes the other and vice versa. In this way, religion is embraced as culture and, thus, framed together with the secularization process as constitutive parts of a unified European value system, despite their fundamental antithesis. This transformation of meaning does not only

entail a certain invalidation of Christianity; in addition, it further confirms the institutional dominance of the modernity paradigm. As Brubaker (2016: 2) puts it:

the culturalization of religion is doubly convenient from a nationalist-populist point of view. On the one hand, it allows Christianity to be privileged as culture in a way that it cannot be privileged as religion, given the liberal state's commitment to neutrality in religious matters. On the other hand, it allows minority religious practices, redefined as cultural, to be restricted in a way that would not otherwise be possible, given the liberal state's commitment to religious freedom.

To sum up, the inclusion or exclusion of religious 'signature' themes within the structure of the PRR programme does neither mean that they do constitute core and shared features of their discourse nor that they should be always treated separately, as autonomous components of a party's value system. Rather, this issue should be examined within the context of nativism, i.e. the nodal point of the PRR discursive articulation. In effect, issues such as state/church separation or women's rights are advocated or opposed not because of their historical salience or significance for the local dominant religion, but due to their instrumental potential in rejecting Islam. The PRR parties' definition of 'Christendom' as a civilizational culture, that is 'a precipitate of their civilizational preoccupation with Islam' (Brubaker 2017: 1200), entails, in turn, the loss of its significance as a faith, while the protection of Christianity in the name of liberalism signifies its further secularization. As Roy argues, populists are Christians to the degree that they are anti-Muslim (2016b: 186). Within the PRR discourse, therefore, religion, secularization and liberalism seem to operate as empty signifiers, emptied of their (historically) specific theological, modernizing and political content. Instead of promoting Christian virtues, secularity and freedom of expression, they put forward xenophobia and illiberalism. As such, they eventually form 'criteria for exclusion' (Minkenberg 2013: 11).

THE POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT AND RELIGION IN EASTERN EUROPE

Overall, clericalism is a shared element within the discourse of the PRR parties of Eastern Europe. The fusion between Christianity and populism is differently framed in comparison to their western counterparts, due to context. On the one hand, Western European countries have gone through a long experience of liberal democratic institutional function, and have well-established and, to a large extent, socially integrated immigrant communities. On the other hand, Eastern European societies have very little interaction with Islam and the population of immigrants therein is relatively small. PRR parties, therefore, cannot point to the alleged social threat of Islam. Moreover, this is related to the so-called 'return of history' phenomenon, the transition from the communist type of government to parliamentary democracy. Although Eastern European countries followed the Western European lead as regards politics and the economy, this has not been the case as far as culture and social values are concerned; for the latter they returned to their pre-communist past for inspiration. The re-emergence of pre-communist political legacies had a two-fold effect in relation to religion, its blending with: (1) an extreme version of nationalism; and (2) illiberalism (Minkenberg 2010).

With regard to nationalism, religion became a criterion for cultural self-determination, perceived as an integral part of the nativist narrative against the Islamic East. In particular, religion is not defined in civilizationist terms in accordance with the post-war secularized and

orientalist Western European narrative, but is rather represented as the basis of the people's cultural unity and, as such, as inextricably linked to national belonging per se (Brubaker 2017: 1208). Parties, such as SNS or Jobbik – that were accused of having a positive stance towards fascism – or PiS, view Christianity as part of this glorious past, when it worked as a pool of traditional values; its invocation had an instrumental use in political competition vis-à-vis the labour movement and the Church functioned as a political ally. On the other hand, considering the PRR appeal to religion only as a remnant of the parties' ideological past with no actual (additional) significance for their present platform is problematic. This is because, above all else, the PRR employs religion as a marker of identity to define the hostile other and reinforce collective homogeneity. PiS, for example, equates an imagined Polishness with Catholicism and champions 'A Catholic Poland in a Christian Europe' (Stanley 2016: 117); though not self-portrayed as a religious party, Fidesz does celebrate a nationalist and paganized understanding of Christianity (Ádám and Bozóki 2016), considering it a fundamental element of European culture, which should be defended by all possible means (Orbán 2017); Jobbik views national identity and Christianity to be 'inseparable concepts' (Jobbik 2003); and the Czech SPD advocates the protection of Judeo-Christian values and considers the incoming 'Islamic religious fanatics' to be a step towards the cultural corruption of the country. This type of identitarian rhetoric, therefore, eventually aims at producing and reinforcing the Christian in-group/Muslim out-group distinction mainly in nationalist and cultural terms in order to press for more restrictive immigration policies. It operates, therefore, as a form of nativism and hidden Islamophobia.

In parallel to the nationalization process of Christianity, here religion has also worked as the cultural pretext for deviating from the liberal Western European social norm as well, taking in some cases, such as that of Jobbik, and even the form of Euroscepticism. By equating 'the people' with the religious body, the target of the parties' criticism is not only Islam but the secular/modernist elites as well, who allegedly serve Brussels bureaucracy and its institutions. Overall, the Eastern European parties have a negative stance vis-à-vis the agenda of freedom rights, LGBT rights and gender equality, contrary to the Western European PRR paradigm. While most of them have not acquired issue ownership of the religious agenda, they support pro-clerical policies, such as the close relation between Church and state or the instruction of religious courses in primary and secondary education. Under Fidesz's rule, the state's Fundamental Law was amended to make special reference to the place of Christianity in Hungary (Könczöl and Kevevári 2020). The party also put obstacles to the free operation of non-established Church institutions, putting into question the smooth implementation of a religious freedom framework (United States Department of State 2014), and passed the so-called anti-LGBT law in 2021. Moreover, the procedure for the state recognition of religious institutions became even more difficult, questioning the smooth implementation of a religious freedom framework (Pirro 2015: 153). With regard to the other PRR pole in Hungarian politics, Jobbik is self-defined as 'a Christian, value-centred movement' with special interest on family morals (Jobbik 2003), favouring a closer relationship between the state and the established churches. For the PiS leader, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, Catholicism forms the only value system consistent with Poland. He thus professes his ideological convergence with the ultra-conservative Radio Maryjza movement, which aims at protecting the Polish nation 'from the corrosive influence of modern western civilization' (Stanley 2016: 113, 118–123). Last, SNS considers Christian morals to be the basis of social policy and regards

‘the requirement for the separation of Church and State as a historical and legal nonsense in the Central European space’ (Pirro 2014: 612).

These parties cannot, therefore, invoke social liberalism in order to advance their Islamophobia since this frame sharply contrasts with their very ideological core. Thus, religion is not structured, within the parties’ discourse, along the lines of the invented dichotomy between an oppressive Islam and a liberal Christian Europe, but on the supposed threat Islam poses for national unity. This is because, in Western Europe, the ‘enemy comes from within’, namely the number of Muslims who currently live there, while, in Eastern Europe, the ‘enemy’ forms a potential external ‘intruder’ that would jeopardize local culture (Haynes 2020: 13). Although both groups aimed at avoiding the effects of the immigration waves after the Arab Spring, Western European PRR parties ostensibly based their argumentation on the necessity to protect social liberalism and the human rights framework, while their Eastern European counterparts on the idea of national purity, a thesis communicated as building ‘Christian “bulwarks” against Islam’ (Brubaker 2017: 1209). In other words, the essentialist stereotype of the Muslim as an alien and brutal invader is not constructed in the name of the modern European value system, but refers to the alleged protection of state security. In this regard, it is important to note that capitalizing on the produced feeling of insecurity, before the danger of the alleged Muslim ‘occupation’ caused by immigrant flows, seems to be an effective electoral strategy as well, despite the fact that most Eastern European societies are highly secularized and PRR constituencies are not so religiously oriented. The Greek PRR in general, and the EL in particular, shares the same discourse regarding religion as its Eastern European counterparts. By identifying Orthodox Christianity with the Greek ‘people’, it has altogether acquired social legitimization and growing electoral influence (Papastathis and Litina 2021).

To conclude, the role of religion in Eastern European PRR politics is critical. Christianity is a mobilizing factor; its invocation can have a legitimizing effect when defending current authoritarian and intolerant policies and it can be used as a value frame for breaking with the communist past (reviving their pre-communist past) (Pirro 2014: 606). Above all else, its use acquires a nationalist and securitarian character (Brubaker 2017: 1209), which provides meaning to the signifier ‘religion’ in relation to the PRR political strategy producing important electoral gains. In this way, however, clericalism, as an orientation, becomes empty of any true religious reference, acquiring instead a nativist, Islamophobic and in some cases even a Eurosceptic content; instead of signifying faith, Christianity is sacrificed on the altar of party politics, and its ‘culturalization’ is communicated as a nationalized exclusionist form of belonging.

CONCLUSION

Within a broad spectrum of questions related to populism and religion, the present chapter focused on the use of religion by European PRR parties. Following the literature, it suggests that, as a general rule, the PRR has employed Christianity as a feature of national identity and cultural belonging to construct an in-group/out-group distinction; transforming it, thus, into hidden nativism. Still, the party family is divided in relation to its support for the religious agenda, since populist discourse acquires diverse articulations and aims at different political ends, depending on the political and social context. With regard to electoral politics, it is interesting to note that the religious body has been historically sceptical to align with PRR parties,

since the mainstream right party family retains the ownership of the religious agenda, disallowing a break of its attachment with devout voters, the so-called ‘vaccine effect’ (Arzheimer and Carter 2009; Montgomery and Winter 2015).

On the other hand, there are indications that, in recent years, the PRR has started to gain the preference of religious constituencies. In this regard, two factors related to religion are considered of special importance: religious homogeneity associated with national belonging; and the idea that Islam would threaten this homogeneity. With this there is a risk of ultra-nationalism, Islamophobia and a rejection of multi-culturalism (Minkenberg 2018: 545). Still, there is no clear evidence of a positive relationship between religiosity and the PRR vote in Western Europe, while the situation differs in parts of Central-Eastern Europe (Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville 2022). The electoral relation, therefore, between PRR actors and religion is dynamic, while the generated discourse on religion does not exhibit a static character; its form and structure changes in accordance with the political, economic and social developments in time and space. Within this framework, the alliance between some PRR parties and Church institutions within the context of the anti-vax movement, or the relation between a religious conspiracy theory frame and populism, are research questions of special interest. In brief, a lot of research remains to be conducted to further explore the diverse aspects of this broad rubric. I hope this chapter, by examining the evolving situation in both Western and Eastern Europe, has contributed some steps towards this direction.

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40. Populism and the commons

Alexandros Kioupkiolis

INTRODUCTION

At first glance, populist politics and the commons display marked affinities. Populism implies typically an appeal to ‘the common people’ that asserts popular sovereignty against elites (Canovan 1999: 3; 2005: 29, 68). The commons are ‘constituted of three main parts: (a) common resources, (b) institutions... and (c) the communities (called *commoners*)’ (Dellenbaugh et al. 2015: 13), who self-manage the common goods. Hence, ‘commoners’ or ‘the common people’ lie at the heart of populism and the commons alike. And the sovereign agency of the ‘common people’ is pivotal to both.

Furthermore, both the common(s) and left populism have been championed in recent years as political strategies to contest the global rule of neoliberal capitalism and induce radical democratic transformation. Among others, Chantal Mouffe (2018) is famous for propagating the populist path (see also Errejón and Mouffe 2016; Smucker 2017; White 2016), while for Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri the ‘common’ should become ‘the central concept of the organization of society’ (Hardt and Negri 2012: 71, 92).

On the other hand, contemporary proponents of democratic change have also pitted common(s) and left populism against each other. Mouffe has taken issue with the principle of ‘the common’ from the standpoint of radical democracy (Mouffe 2018: 54–55), while Hardt and Negri, standing for ‘the common’, have dismissed all types of populism on the grounds of being elitist (Hardt and Negri 2017: 23).

The following foray into populist politics and the commons will trace out ties and disjunctions between the two, mounting the case that a powerful counterhegemonic intervention should build on their *complementarities*. After elucidating its terms, discussion will seek to debunk arguments that dwell on the conflicts between the two. Three further steps will explore the convergences between populism and the commons by laying out how late social movements have transfigured core components of populist mobilization in tune with the spirit of the commons, engendering thus a figure of ‘common populism’ or populist commons.

CONCEPTS AND POLITICAL LOGICS

The ‘commons’ or ‘common-pool resources’ (Ostrom 1990) or ‘commons-based peer production’ (Benkler and Nissenbaum 2006) designate goods that are collectively used and/or collectively produced. There are many different kinds of commons, from natural common-pool resources (fishing grounds, irrigation canals, etc.) to common productive assets and digital goods, such as open-source software (Benkler and Nissenbaum 2006; Ostrom 1990). These diverse common goods are administered and shared in egalitarian and participatory ways by the communities which generate or use them (Benkler 2006; Ostrom 1990: 90–102). Crucially, the collective terms of the ‘commons’ eschew the logic of both private-corporate and

state-public property (Caffentzis 2013; De Angelis 2017; Ostrom 1990: 1–30). Finally, much present-day analysis foregrounds the collective praxis of ‘commoning’, that is, of instituting, governing, sharing and fabricating the commons (Dardot and Laval 2014; Linebaugh 2008).

Turning to the notoriously elusive ‘populism’, a consensus has crystallized in recent years over two defining axes: the centrality of the people as the sovereign source of power, and opposition to elites which has robbed the people of its sovereignty and harmed the interests of the majority (Canovan 1999; de la Torre 2015; Laclau 2005; Mudde 2004). The ensuing argument sticks to these formal structures of people-centrism and anti-elitism. Beyond them, actual populisms can assume a rich and contradictory variety of features. They can be nationalist, exclusionary and right-wing or inclusionary, pluralist and left-leaning. They can be top down, revolving around the persona of a charismatic leader, or leaderless grassroots movements and so on (Aslanidis 2016; Gerbaudo 2017; Grattan 2016; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013; Weyland 2017).

To fathom a common ground between populism and the commons one should delve thus into their underlying political logics: the basic modes of thinking and acting that inform them beyond their variable contents and forms. The populist logic is ruled by the primacy of ‘the people’, popular sovereignty and anti-elitism, while the commons turn on communities of ‘commoners’ sharing common goods and co-deciding their production and distribution on terms of equality, fairness and participation. Hence, the collective self-determination of a community of equally enfranchised members makes up the shared core of both political logics.

Divergences crop up as one veers away from this site of confluence. Confrontation with elites is key to populism, while the commons are more focused around common goods. Traditional forms of the ‘commons of nature’, such as forests, land and irrigation channels, are attached to local, often rural communities (Ostrom 1990), while digital commons are frequently global (Bauwens et al. 2019). In contrast, modern populism tends to anchor the ‘people’ in the nation-state (Canovan 2005; de la Torre 2015). Furthermore, populist mobilization often coheres around a personalistic leader (Laclau 2005: 100; Weyland 2017), while the commons are inclined towards participatory decision making.

Such manifest discrepancies do not annul, however, the cardinal space of overlap. Nor do they raise insurmountable barriers to potential or desirable conjunctions. It is not simply that the communities of ‘commoners’ and the ‘people’ are amenable to a plurality of constructions which may come to identify them, or that struggle against predatory elites is also paramount in the commons since the times of ‘primitive accumulation’ (De Angelis 2007; Linebaugh 2008). It is also that populism and the commons can and should be conjugated to further wide-ranging democratic renewal in our times.

SURMOUNTING CONTRADICTION

To clear the ground for this proposition, we can begin by debunking arguments which highlight conflicts between the commons and populism. On the one side, Mouffe has contested the idea that the ‘common’:

might provide the main principle of organization of society. The central problem with this celebration of ‘the common’ ... is that, by postulating a conception of multiplicity that is free from negativity and antagonism, it does not make room for the recognition of the necessarily hegemonic nature of the social order. In the case of Hardt and Negri, their refusal of representation and sovereignty proceeds

from an immanentist ontology that is clearly in contradiction with the one that informs my conception of radical democracy. (Mouffe 2018: 54–55)

The ‘central problem’ with this critique is that it is predicated on the ontology of the common assumed by Hardt and Negri. A diverse array of other advocates and practitioners of the commons do not share the same ontological convictions *and* accentuate antagonism and hegemony: the perennial struggles of the commons with social and political elites which enforce the rule of capitalist property (Bauwens et al. 2019; Caffentzis 2013; De Angelis 2007).

On the opposite side, Hardt and Negri’s verdict against populism hangs likewise on shaky foundations. The notion that the people is always a unified body which suppresses multiplicity (Hardt and Negri 2004: xiv–xv, 106–107) imputes an ahistorical essence to the ‘people’ which is contradicted by its multifarious pluralist enactments (Grattan 2016; Kioupkiolis 2019). The same doctrinaire essentialism vitiates their claim that all kinds of populism are ‘characterized by a central paradox: constant lip service to the power of the people but ultimate control and decision-making by a small clique of politicians’ (Hardt and Negri 2017: 23). From the United States (US) Populist movement in the late nineteenth century to the 2011–2012 insurgencies of the Spanish 15M, the Greek ‘squares’ and Occupy, a variety of populist struggles attest to the contrary (Aslanidis 2016; García Agustín 2020; Grattan 2016; Kioupkiolis 2019).

Since 2020, positions contrasting leftist populism with the commons have been reasserted, with a twist. They conclude by pointing to the ‘urgent need’ (Dyer-Witthford 2020: 182) to conjugate the two, without, however, elaborating on how such a conjunction can effectively come about (see also Howarth and Roussos 2022). The following sections will take up this precise challenge.

Populist politics and the commons can complement each other as strategic components of a project radicalizing democracy. The people-centric and anti-elitist logic of constructing popular subjects can lean on grassroots activity and egalitarian participation to deepen democracy and avoid co-optation and defeat. Similarly, the diverse bottom-up practices of commoning can coalesce in broad-based popular fronts and programmes to coordinate their labours, to incline them towards democratic transformation and to reach out to wider social sectors (Dyer-Witthford 2020; Howarth and Roussos 2022).

Nation-state, top-down populism could hardly challenge neoliberal rule and advance democratization in our critical juncture. Since 2015, two leftist populist interventions, SYRIZA and Podemos, have confirmed this typical experience of the twentieth century. Organizations directed by a central leadership may achieve electoral gains and even accede to state power. However, they seem to fail to overhaul the status quo and initiate democratic reform if they are not backed up by massive popular engagement in the making of key decisions and their realization. It is such a popular ‘ownership’ of a counterhegemonic project which can buttress populist governments to face up to the international forces of neoliberal hegemony. In the Greek case, when SYRIZA bowed to the concerted pressures of the European Union and International Monetary Fund, an alternative ‘Plan B’ could have been implemented only if it were collectively owned and pursued by broader social sectors (Papadatos and Laskos 2020; Prentoulis 2021).

Egalitarian democratic movements have not accrued yet the required stamina and structure to carry out systemic innovation. But the ‘vertical’ solutions of the past – centralized parties, governments and leaders – could hardly redeem the potential of progressive populism towards

ampler freedom and equality without sustained popular involvement and decentralized, grassroots democracy. The exercise of power from above is in principle at odds with the collective self-government of the people on terms of equal freedom, and it prevents societies from honing their own capacities for self-management. Commoning can vitally contribute to grassroots self-direction and alternative institution-building (Zielke et al. 2021: 13).

On the other hand, lack of political awareness or dubious presumptions about historical change have resulted in a dearth of strategic thought and politics in contemporary commoning (Kioupkiolis 2020). Significantly, there is little engagement with what emerges as *the* strategic question for transformative politics in our times: how to configure a collective actor that would commit itself to a large-scale project of social renewal. Today, collective actors who would strive for democratic alternatives are missing, or they are fleeting, small and dispersed minorities. Social heterogeneity, precarization, individualism and massive political disaffection are pervasive forces perpetuating the status quo and diluting or co-opting social contestation and alter-political action (Caffentzis 2013: 66–81; De Angelis 2007: 3–10; Wright 2018: 56).

There is a fundamental reason for the scant concern with political subjectivation and organization in the commons. Advocates of digital commons and commoners with Marxist leanings subscribe to socio-centric theories of epochal shifts, according to which political revolutions occur in the aftermath of structural-technological innovations and mutations in the social relations of production (Bauwens et al. 2019: 50–52; De Angelis 2017; Hardt and Negri 2017: xv–xvi, 279, 290–295). Such ‘structural’ and socio-centric perspectives deflect attention away from the conscious political activity that must unfold within any social space, including the economy and technology, to reconstitute relations and practices. Nurturing a new social imaginary is a precondition for actual commoners to commit themselves to objectives and modes of organization which would occasion the transition towards a commons-based society. Otherwise, the actual hegemonic grip of neoliberal capital on both the activity and the minds of commoners is likely to maintain its hold (De Angelis 2010; P2P Foundation 2017).

The significance of integrating contemporary commons – such as decentralized open science and technology, small-scale communal agriculture or networked ‘fab labs’ – in broader political contexts to link and scale them up has been stressed in relatively few quarters researching the commons (McCarthy 2019; Zielke et al. 2021). Without such counterhegemonic framing, dispersed initiatives with a transformative potential are likely to remain isolated and confined to relatively privileged groups. Hence, ‘commoning risks becoming an identity-based, particularist endeavour that fails to construct a broad enough social base to constitute a genuinely democratic counter-hegemonic alternative’ (Zielke et al. 2021: 12).

It is precisely in this respect that leftist populism furnishes the crucial supplement: a theory and practice of welding together a broad-based popular subjectivity animated by new political imaginaries and projects (Gerbaudo 2017; Grattan 2016; Laclau 2005, 2014). The collective identity of the ‘people’ is deeply ingrained in democracy by its constitution. Moreover, a certain logic of populist mobilization which rallies a community of different forces against the same culprit, located in the ‘elites’ or ‘the establishment’, has also become widespread under late modern conditions of diversity and fragmentation (Bolton 2017: 6–7; Mouffe 2018; Smucker 2017: 51; Srnicek and Williams 2015: 158–161). Through this antagonistic populism, fractured and heterogeneous social classes which are variably but severely affected by neoliberal hegemony can come together as the united people of the subaltern against a privileged minority.

Hence, making a people, rather than a class or other identities and structures, the ground of collective subjectivity and coalescence is currently a proposition propounded not only by a wide range of leftist or radical theorists, but also by social movements and activists (Smucker 2017: 241–247; Srnicek and Williams 2015: 155–174; White 2016: 35). The mobilizational force of grassroots ‘leaderless’ populism, bringing together people from different backgrounds against a common enemy, has been also empirically corroborated in data-based analyses of the recent Yellow Vest movement in France (Lüders et al. 2021).

The following sections trace out actual confluences between commoning and populism along egalitarian and emancipatory lines, sketching the rudiments of commons-based popular alliances for radicalized democracy. I focus on three areas of overlap: egalitarian populist movements nurturing diverse common goods; the same movements reconfiguring populist politics itself in tune with the logic of the commons; and new municipalism in Spain.

MOVEMENTS PURSUING COMMON GOODS

Whereas ‘populism’ often calls to mind demagogic leaders who make popular promises to the ‘masses’, by an interesting twist of fate recent years have also witnessed the (re-)emergence of leaderless populist social movements. Research in late ‘bottom-up’ populism, most notably the Arab Spring, the Spanish 15M or Indignados, the Greek Squares movement and the North American Occupy in 2011–2012, has been growing (Aslanidis 2016; de la Torre 2015; Gerbaudo 2017; Grattan 2016). In these mobilizations, a novel figure of populism arises which evinces affinities with populist movements of the past, such as the US Populists and the *Narodniki*, but it is also informed by a distinctive commitment to the commons.

Blending populism with commons, mass populism in 2011–2012 pursued diverse commoning practices. Beginning with the making-common of space itself, the public area of squares and streets in Spain, Greece and the US was managed by an open and diverse community of city dwellers and newcomers organized in free assemblies (Stavrides 2016: 165–171, 177). In these common spaces, a wide array of specific common goods was provided in the encampments that were formed. Participants in the US Occupy movement engaged in everyday practices of sharing food, media, legal aid, medical aid, libraries, art, work and general care for reproductive needs (Grattan 2016: 169). The commons were ‘at work in the desire to “Occupy everything!”’ (Grattan 2016: 168). The 2011 Greek Squares movement in Athens set up commons around art, work (a time bank) and various goods in an exchange bazaar. These commons were sustained and diversified in its aftermath, extending to the establishment of ‘social clinics’, ‘solidarity schools’, food collectives, etc. (Roussos 2019; Varvarousis et al. 2021). Likewise, the 2011 encampments and their direct offshoots in Spain championed digital ‘open source’ commons as well as commons of care and material reproduction offering food, affective support and sanitation (Fominaya 2020: 129–130, 134–139; Varvarousis et al. 2021).

This articulation of populist mobilization with egalitarian politics and the commons has also been enacted in several environmental movements in the last decades, most notably perhaps in the Americas. Pro-commons environmental populism is a critical development in times of climate change and environmental degradation calling for localized action, broad-based engagement and global policies.

The ‘Water War’ in Cochabamba (1999–2000) and subsequent struggles in Bolivia to reclaim natural resources for local populations illustrate how populism might be ‘a valid strat-

egy to achieve emancipatory transformations in environmental governance' (Andreucci 2019: 625). This cycle of contention set off with the heterogeneous coalition of the 'Coordinator for the Defense of Water and Life' which allied factory workers, environmentalists, neighbourhood associations and others in a common battle against the privatization of water services in Cochabamba. The coalition outlined an understanding of 'the people' as those dispossessed of access to natural resources and political power. The popular front combined a radical democratic component – 'the revindication of direct, popular democracy' – with a commons component – 'the social reappropriation of the common good' (Oscar Olivera, member of the Coordinadora, quoted in Andreucci 2019: 627).

The Morales-MAS government, which eventually took power riding on the wave of this counterhegemonic ferment, did not live up to such aspirations. But the populist agitation around eco-democracy was grassroots and crafted its own collective identity. This was powerfully articulated with communal self-governance around natural resources and a subaltern-class base, giving rise to a distinct figure of commons-based populism vying for subaltern democratic hegemony (Andreucci 2019: 628–631).

A cognate populism upholding the 'commons of nature' against neoliberal incursions has risen up in the US Dakotas and Nebraska since 2009. A broad church of farmers, Native nations, users of public parks and water opposed the plans for the Keystone XL pipeline which would bring to the US diluted bitumen from the tar sands in Alberta, Canada, traversing Nebraska and the Dakotas (Bosworth 2019: 585). From 2010 till 2017, pipeline opponents vocally claimed a populist identity by protesting in the name of 'we the People'. The mobilization, which revindicated the living legacy of the grassroots People's Party in the region, was inspired by the desire for 'less establishment, more populism', asserting that 'a movement of We the People, in the Heartland of America, is one of the big reasons we stopped a pipeline' (activist quoted in Bosworth 2019: 586). The case against the pipeline conjugated thus populism with the defence of the commons of tribal land and ecologically sensitive areas (Bosworth 2019: 587).

PEOPLE COMMONING THE POLITICAL

Late grassroots populism does not relate to common goods only as external and accessory activities. It has injected them into the core of its political intervention, refiguring populist politics in accord with the egalitarian logic of co-deciding and co-creating that defines commoning. The insurgent citizenship of the Spanish 15M in 2011 (and the Greek Squares and US Occupy in 2011, among others) can serve again to illuminate this point. This movement embodied a scheme of 'common populism' which makes political decision making and initiative accessible to ordinary people on a footing of equality, turning politics into a common enterprise of common people in their diversity. This 'common populism' in principle stands opposed to hegemonic populist politics whereby the 'masses' are commanded from the top by individual leaders, and their identity tends to be homogenized.

Leadership, the concentration of power and vertical hierarchies are typical of populist politics (Laclau 2000: 208–210; Weyland 2017). In the case of 15M, too, collective activity and initiative, a type of common leadership exercised by the movement itself, were concentrated in the squares of Puerta de Sol in Madrid and Plaça de Catalunya in Barcelona. Informal individual leaders arose, also, due to differences in political know-how, communicative skills,

the division of labour among spokespersons and moderators, etc. (Razquin Mangado 2017: 132–134, 324; Sitrin and Azzellini 2014: 135). But organized political leadership and elected leaders, a standing separation of directors and directed, were ruled out as a matter of principle, and decisive power resided in the general assemblies (Castells 2012: 113, 129; Nez 2012: 128–129).

The institutional machine of binding mandates, rotation and alternation in key functions, the enforcement of time limits and the use of lot to equalize the opportunity to speak in assemblies, and the formation of multiple working groups enhancing the opportunity to participate in collective deliberation were several effective measures through which people fended off the rise of exclusionary leadership from the top. Crucially, power asymmetries and exclusions from equal influence were a matter of common reflection and an object of sustained struggle (Nez 2012: 129–130; Razquin Mangado 2017: 250; Sitrin and Azzellini 2014: 135–136).

Alternative modes of effective leadership were cultivated thus through the assembly form, distributed leadership, technopolitics, institutional devices, such as the use of lot, time limits, rotation and another, feminized ethos of ‘leading by obeying’. These patterns have surfaced across multiple sites of action, from digital networks to municipalist politics, sketching out the rudiments of *another populism* which renders leadership a collective process governed in common by ordinary people in their diversity. Decision making in open assemblies of the multitude emerges as the key stratagem through which contemporary collective action strives ‘to common’ political leadership (Graeber 2014; Lorey 2014; Thorburn 2017).

URBAN PEOPLE COMMONING THE CITY

‘New municipalism’, a global drift encompassing several cities across continents (Pisarello and Comisión Internacional de Barcelona en Comú 2018: 10), is another hinge point linking grassroots populism and the commons in our present. Its Spanish chapter and, particularly, the citizen platform Barcelona en Comú (BnC), which governed the city of Barcelona from 2015 to 2023, stands out internationally as a signature instance of new municipalist politics in which a variant of bottom-up populism converges with urban commons.

Activists and advocates have already noted how municipalist projects have the potential to mobilize people while championing a strong participatory democracy ‘where ordinary people actually have a say’ (Roth 2021: 69). But they have misleadingly opposed new municipalism to leftist counterhegemonic populism (Roth 2021: 68–69), obfuscating the populist moment in the former.

Since 2015, the ‘cities of change’ of the new municipalist wave have imagined themselves as a democratic response to the critical circumstances of steep inequalities, elite rule, reinvigorated patriarchy, aggravating social expulsions, climate change and civilization crisis. Starting to rise in 2014 across different localities in Spain and walking in the footsteps of the 15M movement, political municipalism reclaimed thus the city as the heartland of citizens’ democracy, weaving relations of mutual support in everyday life through ‘proximity’ and ‘from below’ (Colau 2018: 193–196; Martínez and Wissink 2021; Roth et al. 2019: 14).

The municipalist venture in Spain bore the populist DNA of 15M, its people-centrism which focuses on ‘citizens’ and democracy for the many, along with its progressive anti-elitism (Martínez and Wissink 2021). But it started out from a certain diagnosis of the political conjecture after the 15M insurgency, which failed to reshuffle the decks of power. Dominant

institutions remained largely impervious to demands for popular sovereignty, a more equitable distribution of wealth and the protection of welfare rights and political liberties. Hence a turn from mobilizations to ‘the electoral’, which took a municipalist inflection in 2014–2015. The aim was to reach out to all citizens affected by the crisis, to ‘win the city’ and to translate the politics vindicated by civic spaces and activism into electoral majorities and local institutional policies (Forti and Russo Spena 2019: 21–22, 29; Kois et al. 2018: 14–15).

In 2014–2015, ‘municipalist platforms’ or ‘confluences’ were put together to contest the May 2015 local elections across Spain. Confluences were alliances between converging political projects of parties, movements, civic groups and non-organized citizens. They were designed as new instruments of political articulation that could bring together those already organized and people beginning or willing to mobilize (Junqué et al. 2018: 72–73, 80; Kois et al. 2018: 14–15). Later, these citizens’ platforms were implicated in administration, as coalition or minority governments in five of the largest cities in Spain: Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Zaragoza and A Coruña (Monterde 2019: 29–34). BnC, led by Ada Colau, was prominent among them. It was established in 2014 and won the local elections of May 2015, obtaining 25 seats and 2 per cent of the vote and 11 councillors (Forti and Russo Spena 2019: 45–47). In 2019, it came second with 20.71 per cent and 10 seats, eventually forming a minority government.

The two electoral programmes of the Barcelona municipalist platform open a window into its distinctive blend of pro-commons discourse with citizen-centred populism. ‘Citizens’ (*ciudadanos*), citizens as a whole (*ciudadanía*) and ‘persons’ (*personas/persones* in Catalan) occupy the centre of reference in both programmes (Barcelona en Comú 2015: 7, 14; 2019: 23). The 2015 programme was construed from the outset as a ‘citizens’ mandate’ (Barcelona en Comú 2015: 7). In 2019, ‘Future Barcelona’ was introduced as a ‘radically democratic city’ in which ‘citizens as a whole (*ciudadania* in Catalan) have the ultimate word’ (Barcelona en Comú 2019: 4).

The platform denounced the ‘unfair policies’ which forced the most vulnerable population to assume the cost of the crisis (Barcelona en Comú 2015: 19). The political objective of BnC was thus to establish an alternative to the ‘devastating policies imposed by the State and European Commission’ (Barcelona en Comú 2015: 14). The 2019 programme mildly confirms populist anti-elitism: ‘In the Future Barcelona there is no room for lobbies and speculators, for oligopolies and major [economic] powers. It is a city made by people [*persones*] and for the people [*persones*]’ (Barcelona en Comú 2019: 23).

Recent research into BnC politics attests to its particular populist inclinations (Sintes-Olivella et al. 2020). An analysis of Ada Colau’s communicative style in social media as mayor of Barcelona indicates that her political discourse in 2015–2017 revolves around the construction of ‘the people’ with whom she identifies. At the same time, she takes on the ‘establishment’ employing an anti-system language against big corporations, banks, traditional parties and elite political actors. The anti-elitist component (9–21 per cent in her posts; Sintes-Olivella 2020: 203), however, is not as salient as the ‘inclusionary populist’ one. She advocates for ordinary people, foregrounding her ‘leadership’ and speaking out in defence of social justice for the most disadvantaged social groups. Hence, her concern with the right to housing, immigration, poverty and women’s rights (Sintes-Olivella et al. 2020: 204–205).

Another study about the ‘politicization of water’ in Barcelona in the last decade (Popartan et al. 2020) brings to the fore the populist tenor of BnC politics. Its main slogan being ‘We are common people’ (*Som gent comú*), BnC frequently targets a multitude of populist proxies: the

elites, the privileged, powerful interests, the 200 Catalan families, etc. (Popartan et al. 2020: 1421). The conflict over the public management of the city's water system was framed by BnC in such populist terms. When it entered Town Hall in 2015, the platform endorsed Barcelona's water movement for the 'municipalization' of the water supply, which is controlled by the public-private company Agbar. BnC's plea for the 'public, direct and integral management of the water cycle' by the city spoke thus in the name of the 7 million of Barcelona's people and their common interest 'beyond left or right', which should prevail over the 'multimillionaire business of a few' (Consell Municipal de Barcelona 2016, quoted in Popartan et al. 2020: 1422).

In effect, this municipalist populism identified with 'commons' and 'commoning' from its birthdate, inscribing it its very name: 'Barcelona in Common'. The frontline position accorded to the commons did not reduce to general 'measures that prioritize the common' (Barcelona en Comú 2015: 7). New municipalism set out to foster commoning amply and in depth, ranging from the political process itself to the city at large. 'Commoning politics' started from the collective construction of the electoral programme that took place from the second semester of 2014 in different spaces of the municipal platform and in neighbourhood assemblies. These were open to all citizens who wanted to participate to effectively build a 'citizens' mandate' (Barcelona en Comú 2015: 7). The political vision broadened into a transformation of the city's government and urban life itself into collective, open, diverse and egalitarian activities directed from the body of citizens themselves (Barcelona en Comú 2015: 14; see also Baird et al. 2018: 49–51; Junqué et al. 2018: 72–74). Accordingly, a collective intervention led by a particular group was opened up to a praxis of commoning the municipalist project through free collective participation and collaboration.

In its own structure, the municipalist confluence was committed to internal democracy and the facilitation of political participation. Its coordinating body consisted of representatives of all groups and spaces of the platform. Its members usually rotated on a regular basis and were subject to the highest authority of the whole community of platform members. To lift civic participation, the organizational model was anchored in neighbourhood assemblies and everyday life. Multiple spaces and modalities of participation and decision making were introduced, both 'presencial' and digital, so that more people could get involved as they could and wished (Junqué et al. 2018: 72–75; Roth 2019: 61–63).

In effect, in its first term in city government, BnC rolled out a wide array of policies which implemented the new municipalist agenda of commoning politics and the city. To step up civic involvement in decision making, the BnC government launched the digital platform Decidim Barcelona, which enables citizens to submit proposals for the city and to collectively deliberate and decide on them (Roth et al. 2018: 116–117). Furthermore, people took part in the co-production of public policies, from design to implementation, through 'Neighbourhood Plans' and 'multi-consultations'. Effective control over the administration was augmented by monitoring the ethical conduct of civil servants and by enhancing the transparency of financial administration (Bonet i Martí 2018: 114–115).

Beyond the conduct of government itself, new municipalism promotes the commoning of public goods and services through new institutional frameworks. Since 2015, BnC's politics has transferred municipal goods to communities for the realization of social and cultural projects. It has promoted the community management of public buildings, services and spaces, and it has striven for the 'remunicipalization' of basic services. 'Remunicipalization' included the establishment of a new energy company and the ongoing struggle to recuperate the privat-

ized water company of Barcelona. The city drafted, furthermore, the ‘Citizen Assets program for community use and management’ which regulates civic access to municipal goods and their transfer to citizens’ groups or communities, legalizing and protecting several squatted social centres (Forné et al. 2018; Martínez and Wissink 2021: 11–14).

In the economic field, the city government in 2015–2019 fostered the social and solidarity economy and the co-production of economic politics with civic associations. It invested a considerable budget (4 million euros per year) which opened funding lines for cooperatives. Furthermore, the administration set up centres of information and support for new social and solidarity economy initiatives, it invented instruments of coordination and support and it knitted municipal and international networks (Corrons et al. 2018: 176–178).

CONCLUSION

The political logics of inclusionary left populism and commoning are not identical. Self-managing and sharing particular goods are more salient in the commons. Anti-elitism is typically more pronounced in populist politics, in which top-down leadership may often substitute for the actual self-rule of the people. But in both theory and practice, left populism and the commons do converge over the democratic empowerment of ‘ordinary people’ who reclaim or effectively exercise their sovereignty in the polity or specific communities and collective goods. Probing the conceptual and real imbrications of the two can chart new lines of inquiry into populism and the commons. In political terms, their combination turns out to be paramount for building up power for egalitarian transformation beyond globalized neoliberal hegemony.

Scrutinizing the intersections between populist politics and the commons turns the spotlight to the city and ecological movements, among others, which are rarely considered as terrains of significant populist intervention.¹ From a political slant, populism can furnish the political strategy which is missing in the commons: a powerful strategy for rallying together social forces for change, for winning over the hearts and the minds of popular majorities and for imbuing activity with a conscious direction. Without this strategic supplement, the diverse initiatives and practices of commoning are likely to remain dispersed, with little political thrust. On the other hand, populist politics without effective participation and self-government at the grassroots is likely to reduce itself to a top-down process and a thin formula or rhetoric of ‘the people’ without sustainable popular agency.

NOTE

1. After research and writing for this chapter finished in the summer of 2022, Chantal Mouffe published *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution: Left Populism and the Power of Affects* (2022), affirming the importance of considering environmental politics as a critical field for populist mobilization.

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41. Colonialism and populism

Dani Filc

INTRODUCTION

The literature on populism has emphasized the importance of exclusionary and inclusionary traits when discussing the phenomenon (Mudde and Rowira Kaltwasser 2013). The present chapter argues that the colonial relationship helps to understand why most European movements are exclusionary, while most of Latin American populism is inclusionary. For sure, colonialism by itself does not provide a single and whole explanation for the development of inclusionary or exclusionary populism. Kenneth Roberts provides an alternative compelling explanation that relates types of populism and variants of capitalism (Roberts 2019). However, it is my claim that whether a specific populist movement will be inclusionary or exclusionary is primarily related to the ways in which a variety of populist movements in different countries conceptualize ‘the people’, and that this conceptualization is strongly linked to the position of each country in the colonial relationship. The analysis of Latin American and European examples will exemplify the chapter’s claim. The chapter will also show that three cases of European inclusionary populism – SYRIZA in Greece, Podemos in Spain and La France Insoumise (LFI) in France – that apparently challenge this claim, in fact may strengthen it.

INCLUSIONARY AND EXCLUSIONARY POPULISM

Populism has been defined as a thin ideology, a discourse, a political style, a political strategy or a way of mobilization. Cas Mudde (2007) understands populism as an ideology that considers society as divided into two antagonistic groups – the pure people and the corrupt elite – and which argues that politics should be an expression of the people’s will. Discursive approaches define populism as ‘a dichotomic discourse in which “the people”... is discursively constructed as a large powerless group through opposition to “the elite” conceived as a small and illegitimately powerful group’ (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017: 310). Robert Jansen (2011) considers populism as a political project that mobilizes marginalized social sectors articulating an anti-elitist, ordinary people-centred rhetoric.

Building on the discursive approach, Mudde’s definition and Jansen’s conceptualization, I propose to understand populism as a ‘family’ of political movements that put forward alternative hegemonic political projects in societies where conflicts over the inclusion/exclusion of certain social groups are central, mobilizing through a dichotomy between a virtuous people and a corrupt elite. Populism comprises two families, inclusionary or exclusionary populism, differentiated by their distinct conceptualizations of ‘we the people’. The people can refer to the totality of the political community, to the ‘plebs’ or to a closed ethno-cultural group (Hermet 2001). Stressing the people as the plebs or as a closed ethno-cultural collective differentiates between inclusionary and exclusionary populism. Inclusionary populist movements stress the notion of the people as plebeians, providing the means for subordinated social

groups to constitute themselves as active collective political subjects. Inclusion, however, is always partial. Firstly, because, populist movements, typically, do not structurally modify the unequal distribution of resources and power. Secondly, because the claim for inclusion is based on a particularistic assertion ('we are the people, too') and not on a universal one.

In contrast, exclusionary populism emphasizes the organic understanding of 'the people' as an ethno-cultural homogeneous unit. It becomes the way in which certain social groups confront neoliberal globalization's threats to their identity by excluding weaker groups, such as migrant workers or ethnic minorities. Exclusion is also partial, since for many of the social groups that support exclusionary populism, it represents a protection against their own exclusion.

Inclusionary and exclusionary processes have three different dimensions: symbolic, material and political. Symbolic inclusion takes place when populist movements build a narrative that presents the excluded group as a central member of the common 'we'. For example, Latin American populist movements postulated the poor, the natives, the working class and the 'dark skinned' as the core of the virtuous people (Benítez 1984). In government, they usually implement policies that improve the material conditions of subordinate groups. First, as part of the common 'we', its share in the distribution of income, wealth and power increases. Second, these movements implement economic policies that promote economic growth, full employment and income redistribution, improving conditions for the previously excluded social groups. In addition, inclusionary populist movements promote and support the political participation of previously excluded groups. Participation in the populist movement grants members of the formerly excluded group access to political power. Second, the excluded group undergoes a process of subjectivation, as it becomes an active collective political subject. Third, populism repoliticizes issues that had been transformed into 'professional' or technocratic questions.

Symbolically, exclusionary movements appeal to a common past in which immigrants or ethnic minorities do not belong, and resort to historical symbols and cultural understandings foreign to the excluded group. Immigrants and other subordinate groups suffer from material exclusion, such as access to welfare services and entitlements. On the political dimension, exclusion involves limiting immigrant access to citizenship, hindering the ability of subordinate groups to organize and criminalizing excluded social groups.

Now, understanding populism as a genus encompassing (at least) two species – inclusionary and exclusionary – raises the question: how can we explain the emergence of either form of populism? This is where colonialism enters the picture.

COLONIALISM AND THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE PEOPLE

Exclusion of the colonized, historically, was central to the colonial relationship, as the very possibility of inclusion would threaten the plundering and exploitation at the root of colonial rule. The notion of the people in colonial contexts was, therefore, inherently exclusionary. Colonialism sought to legitimize and 'naturalize' relations of exploitation through the construction of racial hierarchies of difference that justified and perpetuated the colonial agenda and its inequalities. Thus, racism became an inherent characteristic of colonialism (Cooper 2005).

Colonial racism played, and still plays, a key role in the way in which people in Europe constructed a common ‘we’ and conceptualized the people. The colonial relationship indelibly influenced the modern ideas of demos and citizenship. The forging of ‘Homo Europaeus’ as a racial category signifying the colonizer – distinct and superior to the racial groups of the colonized – was related to notions of national belonging and criteria for citizenship in European countries (Stoler 1992). Colonialism established two differentiated worlds, the metropolitan polity for which ideas such as the sovereign people, democratic citizenship and rights were relevant; and the colonized, for which they were not. A liberal conception of ‘we the people’ as plural coexisted with an organic conception of the people as homogeneous, and the dividing line was the colonial relationship.

LATIN AMERICA’S INCLUSIONARY POPULISM AND ANTI-COLONIALISM

The first wave of populism in Latin America appeared in the 1930–1940s and is associated with names such as Lázaro Cárdenas, Getulio Vargas and Juan Perón. Latin American populism emerged in countries at the periphery of capitalism, all of which coped with the entrenched legacies of colonialism (namely, an elite class that used its economic privileges to maintain an exploitative system of commodity exports). Populism in Latin America manifested a mostly inclusive anti-elitist approach (de la Torre 2000). First-wave Latin American populist movements emerged through the mobilization of excluded social groups (new urban workers, peasants and indigenous groups), resulting in the appearance of the masses in the public sphere. Urbanization, industrialization, demographic explosion and technological and social changes in the agrarian world all converged in the rise of Latin American populism, whose inclusivity took place in the three already mentioned dimensions – material/redistributive, symbolic and political.

Populist economic models emphasized the role of the state in the economy through either direct investment or the nationalization of foreign-owned companies. Economic policies were based on the growth of the public sector, active support of import substitution industrialization and expansive fiscal policies. Socio-economic policies led to a partial redistribution of income and wealth that benefited the excluded masses. Some leaders (such as Arbenz and Cárdenas) carried out agrarian reforms that favoured impoverished peasants. Others (such as Perón and Vargas) implemented measures – such as a minimum wage, paid vacations and strengthening trade unions – that benefited the new working class. More recently, third-wave populist leaders (within the so-called ‘Pink Tide’) have implemented redistributive reforms. Latin American populism uses the concept of ‘the people’ to symbolically include the excluded, since in South America, as in the colonial world as a whole, the category of ‘the people’ is synonymous with the colonial subaltern. The political agent is the people understood as ‘the damned’. This definition of the people is inclusive, stressing an identity comprising a mixture of *creole* (European descendants born in the French or Spanish American colonies), *mestizo* (people of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry) and indigenous heritages. In Latin America, *mestizaje* can be defined as ‘a liberating force that breaks open colonial and neo-colonial categories of ethnicity and race’, allowing for the symbolic inclusion of the excluded (Wade 2005: 242).

The emergence of this identity in the process of anti-colonial struggles allowed populist discourse to blend nationalism and an anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist nativism, which empha-

sized pride in the indigenous past and in the indigenous/non-white roots of the ‘true’ people. Examples include the *indigenismo* of the Peruvian American Popular Revolutionary Alliance, the Peronist claim that they stood for the *cabecitas negras* (‘small black heads’, the derogatory term for working-class internal migrants used by non-Peronist political elites at the time) and Vargas’ allegation that he represented the *povo moreno* (the black people).

Subordinate and excluded groups have been constituted rhetorically as part of the nation, as opposed to the enemies of the people (either foreigners or the internal elites). Their inclusion as part of the positive term of the dichotomy people/anti-people contributed to their integration. While nationalism may become xenophobic, xenophobia was usually directed against the ‘imperialist other’, and not against ethnic or religious minorities. Nativist nationalism sets ‘the people’ against imperialist and colonial forces and their internal ally – the oligarchy. Peronist discourse is an example of the ways in which inclusionary Latin American populism posits the people as including the colonized and as an antonym of colonialism. Perón built a mestizo nativism, claiming that the Argentinian people ‘were conformed by the merging between the European roots and America’s original peoples’ (Perón 1974: 225). Sixty years later, Argentina’s Peronist president Cristina Kirchner attacked British colonialism and recalled that when the British attempted to invade the Rio de la Plata, they ‘were defeated by the people, by the *mulatos*, the blacks and the creoles; the better-off organized social events with the invader, but the true people throw them [the British] out’ (Kirchner 2012). Peronism saw the history of Latin America as the history of its subjection to colonialism either by force (Spanish colonialism) or by economic power (British and American economic colonialisms) (Perón 1974).

However, in the populist view, the history of Latin America is not only the history of colonial pillage, but also the history of the struggle against colonialism, of the struggle between the local elites, allies of colonialism and imperialism and the national-popular forces. In Perón’s words ‘today, the same as yesterday, the struggle is between emancipators and colonialists, between nationals and anti-nationals’ (Perón 1974: 224). Cristina Kirchner read Argentinian history as the opposition between ‘those who love our country’ and ‘those who, without knowing or knowingly, become servile and functional to foreign interests’ (Kirchner 2012).

In the discourses of populist leaders such as Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales or Rafael Correa, the inclusionary definition of ‘we the people’ is also intertwined with anti-colonialism: ‘race and class are central sources of identification for Chávez with the concept of *el pueblo* and he repeatedly emphasized his background as a *pardo* and as a common man’ (Cannon 2008: 741). Correa combined an anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist discourse with an inclusive conception of citizenship, including normalizing migrants’ citizenship status (Gratius 2007). Morales presented himself and his movement as the children and grandchildren of an ongoing struggle against ‘internal and external colonialism’ (Morales 2021). Walter Mignolo (2005: 381) sums it up in claiming that in Latin America, ‘to theorize the concept of the “subaltern” and the “popular” we need to go through the logic of coloniality and the colonial and imperial difference’. The social mix that characterizes former colonies together with the historical weight of anti-colonialist struggles combine to build the people as plural, and pose the enemy as the elites allied with foreign imperialists. Thus, being colonized is central for the constitution of populism as inclusionary. In the next section we will see how this is also true, in the opposite way, for European exclusionary populism.

EXCLUSIONARY POPULISM AND THE COLONIAL CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE *DEMOS*

Since the 1980s, populism has become a significant political force in Western Europe. Populist movements emerged as key political forces in countries such as France, Belgium and Denmark, and even part of government coalitions in Italy, Austria and the Netherlands. Conditions for the emergence of populist movements throughout Europe include: transition to a neoliberal globalization model, with its dire social consequences and the limits it imposes on democratic sovereignty; European integration and the resulting threat to national identities; waves of immigration from developing countries (mostly former colonies); the crisis of socialism and communism as ideologies of subordinate social groups; and the demise of mass political parties as the main mediators between society and the state.

Most populist movements that have surfaced in Western European countries since the late 1980s belong to the exclusionary sub-family (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). They are built around a nativist notion of the people as an organic unit that conflates the *ethnos* with the *demos*. The people, as the Front National (FN) argues, is ‘the community of language, interest, race, memories and culture where man blossoms’ (Rydgren 2008: 169). Western European right-wing populist movements exclude the other to safeguard their own threatened identity and status. They aggressively defend monoculturalism, and support cultural policies designed ‘to defend our roots and reverse the process of deracination’ (Betz 1998: 196).

As discussed earlier, the exclusionary conception of the people is strongly related to the colonial experience: ‘the process of decolonization and its long-term consequences are central issues for... the Front National (FN). The meanings [they] ascribe to the age of empire and to the post-imperial period feed into the controversy over non-European immigration into France’ (Flood and Frey 1998: 69). What they consider to be France’s epic colonial past is fundamental to the nation’s identity. Their exclusionary conception of the French people as an ethno-culturally homogeneous nation is grounded on France’s colonial past. French colonizers developed a racist ideology based on the belief that the French were pure and superior (Sherzer 1998). The racial hierarchy implemented in the former colonies was reflected in the conceptualization of the people in the metropolis. Thus, the FN’s immigration policy is based on the need to preserve a ‘pure’ French identity. As Jean-Marie Le Pen has stated, ‘France is ruined by the weight of... immigration so massive that denaturalizes the very essence of our people and our way of life’. Le Pen (2010) has also recognized that he ‘believes that races are not equal’. From this racist perspective, deeply embedded in the French colonial experience, the formerly colonized continue to be viewed as primitive and inferior, embodied in Le Pen’s claim: ‘I am convinced that immigrants are the *avant-garde* of the barbarian assault on the West’ (2010). Immigration is understood as ‘*colonization a rebours*’ (‘wrong-way colonialism’), which they claim is accepted by the French governments because of a combination of the elite’s greed and moral guilt. Following in her father’s footsteps, Marine Le Pen has objected to the ‘masochism’ of history curricula and has demanded to consider empire as one of the ‘glorious elements’ of the French past, teaching also colonization’s ‘positive aspects’ (Sessions 2017). For the FN, the continued French presence in its few remaining overseas colonies is part of an ‘overall strategy for promoting France’s national revival’ (Flood and Frey 1998: 72).

The Belgian Vlaams Belang (VB) also shares the conceptualization of immigration as ‘inverse colonization’, as exemplified by Filip Dewinter’s article ‘The Colonization of Europe’

(2016). Thus, the colonial experience seems to be a central element in the development of an exclusionary conceptualization of the people as a single nation with a single culture. In contrast to the mestizo nativism of Latin American populism discussed earlier, the FN sees ‘the ideology of “metissage”’ as a threat to French security (Le Pen 2010). The exclusionary ideology of the VB is related to their defence of the Flemish colonial past. Researchers have traced a direct line between the way in which Belgian colonizers treated blacks in the Belgian Congo and the treatment of immigrants and ‘coloured’ minorities in today’s post-colonial Belgium (Mielants 2006). Margarita Gómez-Reino (2001) shows how the racism of the VB and the Lega Nord can be explained in relation to the colonial legacy of racist hierarchies. In the Netherlands, the exclusionary populist politician Rita Verdonk revindicates the Dutch colonial past, while researchers suggest that the roots of Geert Wilders’ anti-Islamism can be found in the Dutch past as a majority-Muslim empire (Emont 2017). The exclusionary conception of the demos, common to European right populist parties, is related to the fact that when former colonial subjects migrated to their former metropolis, they reactivated colonialist forms of exclusion.

WHAT ABOUT EUROPEAN INCLUSIONARY POPULISM?

In an important contribution to explain the development of different types of populism, Roberts argued that left populist parties such as Podemos and SYRIZA challenge the claim that the colonial relationship may contribute to explaining the development of different types of populism (Roberts 2019) and offered a compelling alternative explanation based on varieties of capitalism. However, while the colonial relationship cannot wholly explain the emergence of either inclusionary or exclusionary populism, I will argue that the analysis of European left populism in fact emphasizes the role of the colonial relationship in explaining the development of exclusionary or inclusionary populism. In a nutshell: Podemos moved away from populism to the left of social democracy, LFI struggles with tendencies towards more exclusionary positions and Greece can be considered a crypto-colony (Markou 2017).

To begin with, Podemos emerged in January 2014 from the convergence between militants from the 2011 *indignados* protests, Izquierda Anticapitalista and a group of intellectuals (Pablo Iglesias, Juan Carlos Monedero, Carolina Bescansa, Iñigo Errejón). There is a consensus in the literature that Podemos emerged as a populist movement, deeply influenced by South American populism and Ernesto Laclau’s thought (Castaño 2018; Damiani 2020, 2018; Franzé 2017). In a context in which the prolonged economic crisis had created significant exclusions, Podemos represented an alternative hegemonic project to what they called ‘the 1978 regime’, and mobilized around the antagonism between ‘*la gente*’ (the common people) and ‘*la casta*’ (the caste), i.e. the elites, responsible for the crisis. The party’s first Citizen Assembly marked the adoption of the populist approach, by approving the document ‘Claro que Podemos’, elaborated by Iglesias, Bescansa, Errejón, Monedero and Alegre.

Scholars agree that Podemos’ left populism, modelled on South American populism, was inclusionary and not exclusionary (Castaño 2018; Franzé 2017). As Jacopo Custodi (2021) argues, even Podemos’ nationalism is a counterhegemonic one, not based on ethnic and/or cultural homogeneity but built around three semantic fields: welfare policies and solidarity; people’s mobilization; and cultural and national pluralism. In sum, a nationalism fitting with inclusionary populism. Their conception of Spain as plurinational is also an expression of

their inclusionary character. No wonder that Podemos' perspective of 'the people' is one that explicitly includes ethnic minorities (Castaño 2018).

However, Podemos' trajectory as a populist party was relatively short. It lasted until the Second Citizenship Assembly in which '*Pablismo*' – with the support of the '*anticapitalistas*' – defeated Errejón's supporters, a defeat that would lead to the latter leaving the party, putting an end to Podemos' populist period. As Javier Amadeo argues (2021), the call to build 'the people' as the collective subject of politics is absent from the document approved by the Second Assembly. The document – *Podemos para todos* – presents Podemos as the vehicle for the expression of different social sectors, which are considered to pre-exist the political process by which the collective subject constitutes itself.

The decision to build an electoral alliance with the traditional left radical party Izquierda Unida was both the logical consequence of the abandonment of a populist strategy and reinforced the said change of strategy. This process had begun already in 2016, as depicted by Errejón in an interview:

soon a bunch of people came in around the secretary-general, who came from more traditional left activism in the Communist Party and its youth wing. You could see it in the symbols, in the words... in who we appealed to, in what kind of politics we were doing... From then on, an accelerated process began in which Podemos begins to take on the way of speaking, the political messages, the self-positioning of the traditional left... Podemos began to renounce the national-popular and transversal path and began to orient itself towards the traditional left. (Errejón 2021)

Following the 2019 elections, Podemos became the main member in the coalition of Pedro Sánchez's second government, and established itself as its left leg, still inclusionary but no longer populists. Paradoxically, Más Madrid/Más País – the party created in 2019 by Errejón after splitting from Podemos – was not a populist party either. Más País mixes traditional European leftist themes such as the fight for equality and the defence of the welfare state with green and feminist revindications; and it is not in its ideology, nor in its institutional character or its strategy, a populist party. In sum, Podemos' inclusionary populism, inspired by Latin America's movements, was not stable along time within the context of a former colonialist country, and after a relatively short period it became a traditional left-of-social democracy party, while Más País was established as a green-feminist one.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon's LFI was created in 2016, replacing the Left Front – a coalition that included the Left Party, the Communist Party and the Unitarian Left. While the Left Front was a traditional left-of-social democracy coalition, Mélenchon defined himself as a populist already in 2010 (Mélenchon 2010). In 2015 he reproduced Podemos' populist division of society when he declared: 'There must be a new way of organizing the political field. The people against the caste...; not only right against left' (Mélenchon 2015). The creation of LFI and his 2017 presidential campaign were steps forward in the attempt of building a left populist alternative, aiming to unite the people beyond class, race and gender differences (Marliere 2019).

The Left Front's platform in 2012 was clearly inclusionary. Mélenchon defined the people not as 'an ethnic people, or united by their own religion, or distinguished by the colour of their skin... A people defines itself politically by forming a legal community' (quoted in Damiani 2020: 120). However, as the populist character of his party strengthened, Mélenchon became more nationalist, as assessed by both political rivals and researchers (Ivaldi 2019). Olivier Besancenot, from the New Anti-Capitalist Party, and Macron's former government spokes-

person Benjamin Griveaux, argued that Mélenchon ‘is not an internationalist but a first grade nationalist’ (France Culture 2018). In the 2017 campaign the French flag and other national symbols replaced the traditional left symbols, salient in the 2012 campaign (Alexandre et al. 2021; Ivaldi 2019). Raquel Garrido, one of the founders of the Left Party, declared ‘we are not afraid of declaring our attachment to the homeland and the flag’ (in De Boni 2016). LFI’s approach to France’s role as a global power recalls that of Charles de Gaulle, and Mélenchon does not consider French overseas territories as colonized countries but as fully part of France (Marliere 2019).

Mélenchon’s and LFI’s stands on immigration make it difficult to consider them as inclusionary. In the past, Mélenchon held inclusionary views on immigration. However, in 2017, LFI adopted a more ambiguous position (Castaño 2018; Ivaldi 2019). While Mélenchon has called for a humanitarian approach to immigration, he has attacked the government for scapegoating immigrants, stressed the right of refugees to stay in France and used discursive strategies to humanize migrants; he also has emphasized that France is ‘our territory’, and has presented mass immigration as a serious problem. In a speech at Marseille he claimed that migratory waves ‘cause several problems’ in the countries that welcome them, quoting past socialist thinkers that claimed that the bourgeoisie uses immigration in order to reduce wages and oppose social gains (France Culture 2018). He criticized ‘a Europe where posted workers steal the bread from local workers’ (Ivaldi 2019: 34).

For Mélenchon (2016) the solution is not unrestricted migration, but changing the conditions in the countries of origin, in order for migrants not to be forced to leave because of war, dire economic conditions or political persecution (De Boni 2016). Thus, the chapter of LFI’s 2017 programme dealing with immigration was entitled ‘Struggling against the Reasons to Migrate’ (Castaño 2016) and focused on the ways to eliminate the reasons for migration, backing away from the 2012 demand to regularize all undocumented migrants and close the Centres de rétention d’étrangers (Castaño 2016; Ivaldi 2019). The public discussions concerning the burkini ban also illustrate Mélenchon’s ambiguity, since he both condemned the mayors who banned the burkini and the people who sell them (Mullen 2019). Both politicians and scholars consider that the change in Mélenchon’s views are mainly due to electoral reasons, since there is no real space for an inclusionary populist alternative. As expressed by a member of LFI, if they adopted the radical left stands on immigration they would be ‘politically dead’ (De Boni 2016; Ivaldi 2019). The French case also shows the difficulties in building a stable inclusionary populist alternative, as Mélenchon oscillates between a left of the centre-left party, or a populist one with increasing exclusionary characteristics.

The third party considered as inclusionary populist is SYRIZA. The party emerged in 2004 as a coalition of the alternative left, with roots in Eurocommunism, Trotskyism and new left social movements. As Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis showed, SYRIZA became populist following the 2008 crisis and its aftermath. As the austerity measures excluded broad sectors from access to services and employment, the party was able to mobilize significant and diverse groups within Greek society, employing a people-centred discourse, a discourse that divided Greece between ‘we the people’ and ‘them’, the elites responsible for the crisis and its dire consequences; exemplified in the slogan ‘it is either us or them: together we can overthrow them’ (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014: 129).

SYRIZA is a clear-cut example of inclusionary populism. While in its discourse the political community is constructed primarily in national terms, SYRIZA does not endorse an ethno-culturally closed nationalism, opposing the in-group to the out-group, but a nationalism

posed as against those – Germany, the Troika – who are signalled as responsible for the crisis. SYRIZA's policies are inclusionary towards out-groups (immigrants) and minorities concerning access to welfare, individual and social rights. Moreover, SYRIZA actively promoted the extension of citizenship rights to immigrants, both when in opposition and in power (Font et al. 2021).

SYRIZA's inclusionary character and attempts to both radicalize and extend democracy to excluded groups – the LGBTQ+ community, the youth, immigrants – was strong from its beginning, proactively promoting diversity and full inclusion of excluded groups (Salloum 2021). SYRIZA was able to maintain this strong inclusionary approach also as it became more and more populist, putting forward – discursively and policy-wise – a conception of the people as both heterogeneous and unified (Katsambekis 2019). SYRIZA's inclusionary populism presented a popular democratic vision for Europe as a whole, based on strong social rights, popular sovereignty and democratization, differentiating itself from the Euroscepticism that characterizes many European populist parties (Stavrakakis et al. 2018).

Partly because, theoretically at least, most of SYRIZA's original components were closer to Marxism (either in its more orthodox or more 'Western' expressions), than to Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism, and partly because of the pejorative significations attached in Greece to the signifier 'populism', SYRIZA's leaders were much more reluctant to define themselves as populists than Podemos or the LFI (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). Paradoxically, however, SYRIZA is the only one of our three examples that can be clearly considered still an inclusionary populist party. While, as shown above, Podemos remains inclusionary but as a more 'traditional' left-of-the-centre-left party, and LFI's inclusiveness is ambiguous, SYRIZA, both in government and in opposition, was able to remain populist and inclusionary, even though in office its populism has been moderated (Katsambekis 2019).

Grigoris Markou (2017) explains this by linking SYRIZA with South America's inclusionary populism, through the concept of crypto-colonialism. This concept was developed by Michael Herzfeld in order to characterize countries that acquired political independence at the expense of deep economic dependence. While de jure independent, they were de facto dependent (Herzfeld 2002: 900–901). Greece is, in Herzfeld's view, a paradigmatic example of crypto-colonialism. Financialization provided a mechanism for the 'colonization' of Greece, subjugating the crypto-colonial peripheries to metropolitan centres through financial institutions, and the *Financial Times* described Greece as 'the first Eurozone colony' (Selmic 2018: 869). Markou aptly argues that Greece's crypto-colonial situation explains the rise of SYRIZA as an inclusionary populist party. Greece's past as achieving independence from the Ottoman Empire through an anti-colonial war and its situation as a crypto-colony within the European Union explain the possibility of a populist inclusionary party. While there are examples in Greece of the combination between ethnic nationalism and populism that characterizes European exclusionary populism – as analysed by Katsambekis and Stavrakakis – Greece's anti-colonial past and its crypto-colonial position leaves a place for a combination of populism and anti-colonial civic nationalism. This blend stressed 'the pride and dignity of the impoverished Greek people, as opposed to oppressing power-elites within and outside the debt-ridden country' (Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2017: 401).

CONCLUSION

Incorporating the perspectives of colonialism and coloniality in the analysis of populism helps elucidate and highlight the differences between the Latin American and Western European versions of this particular ideology. How different populist movements define the people and the elite determines whether they are inclusionary or exclusionary. Latin American populism is characterized by a mestizo, anti-colonialist, nativism (*'americanismo'*). For Latin American populist movements, 'the people' is always constituted by the (partial) inclusion of different ethnic and social groups. The elites – allies of the colonialist/imperialist metropolises – are those who are considered 'newcomers' or aliens, while the excluded groups are the autochthonous ones. The deconstruction of colonialist ideology increases the likelihood that the 'plebeian' meaning of the signifier 'the people' will be dominant.

In contrast, Western European populism – despite advancing the pleas of social groups that are on the losing end of neoliberal globalizing processes – is mostly exclusionary because its nativism emerges from an ethno-centrism that legitimizes colonialism, emphasizing the notion of 'the people' as ethno-culturally homogeneous. The alien is the colonized – in the past denied the benefits of citizenship and excluded from the *demos* in the colonies, today denied belonging in the metropolis.

The relative positions of Europe and Latin America within the colonial relationship (as colonizer and colonized) influence how the different groups designated by the signifier 'the people' are articulated, facilitating the emergence of, respectively, exclusionary and inclusionary forms of populism. In the European case, the 'indigenous' people is 'invariably defined as those people who share the dominant, i.e. "Western" and largely European values and culture' (Betz and Johnson 2004: 318). On the contrary, in the Latin American case, the indigenous is always a mix of Native Americans, mestizo, creole and black, a mix that is inherently heterogeneous and inclusive.

Needless to say, the colonial relationship does not wholly explain whether and which species of populist movement will emerge. Populism emerges as the complex interaction between the structure of specific societies, the characteristics of the political system and the emergence of struggles on the inclusion/exclusion of certain social groups. However, colonial history does play an important role in understanding why Latin American populism is mostly inclusionary while its Western European counterpart is mostly exclusionary. Interestingly, a brief analysis of the three cases highlighted in the literature as examples of European inclusionary populism seems to reinforce the link between the colonial relationship and the type of populism emerging in a given movement. Podemos abandoned its early populist character, LFI is struggling to remain inclusionary and SYRIZA remains as inclusionary populist, since Greece, becoming independent through a war against the Ottoman Empire, has long been entangled in a crypto-colonial dialectic with Europe.

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42. Digital populism

Paolo Gerbaudo

INTRODUCTION

What is populism in the twenty-first century? How does the present socio-technical condition affect the way in which populist themes and orientations are articulated? In recent years there has been much discussion about the relationship between populism and transformations in information and communication technologies in the West. The populist surge experienced over the course of the 2010s developed in parallel with one of the most momentous phases of technological innovation in modern history, with the popularization of social media and the diffusion of smartphones, phenomena that have profoundly changed social interactions and everyday experience.

This relationship between populism and social media has not been just a matter of historical coincidence. Populist movements of the most disparate kind have heavily tapped into social media affordances to recruit new supporters and spread their message. From the Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom (UK) to the Donald Trump 2016 elections in the United States (US), but also the use of social media by Jeremy Corbyn's supporters pushing him close to a victory in the 2017 UK national election, as well as the prowess of the likes of Bernie Sanders in the US and Podemos in Spain in using social media, populist movements of disparate kinds have been particularly effective at exploiting the new communication landscape of social media. They have profited from fissures in the communication landscape that have been engendered by the diffusion of social media to appeal to citizens increasingly disgruntled with the conduct of aloof political elites and suspicious towards mainstream news media.

There has been much debate on this issue across political science and media and internet studies, and there continues to be some confusion about the way social media and populism relate to one another. As we shall see, scholarship often invokes two rather different approaches to communication, with different consequences for the way the relationship between communication and politics is understood: an instrumental one, in which social media are seen as just a vessel for certain kinds of messages, and a cultural one in which social media technologies are understood more as a space or an ecology with their own culture and internal structure.

In this chapter, I will summarize the debate on social media and populism and their cross-over, or what I describe as 'digital populism', by proceeding in three steps. First, I shall begin with reconstructing the parallel change in the communication landscape and the development of populist movements that set the basis for the emergence of this phenomenon, presenting the main theories developed in respective debates. Second, I will discuss perspectives that look at digital communication in an instrumental view as a channel of communication and propaganda. Third, I will turn to those cultural approaches that instead lay more emphasis on organizational and sociological questions and pay attention to the convergence between the kind of social relationship fostered by social media and the logic of populist mobilization. The conclusion will summarize the merits and limits of the two approaches and the ensuing research agenda for studying digital populism.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE POPULIST MOMENT

Social media and populism are without doubt among the most influential trends that have marked political developments over the course of the 2010s. To capture their interconnect- edness, and the way in which, as I will argue, social media is structurally conducive to the populist logic of mobilization, we need to begin, from some definitions, and a summary view of their respective profile and development. Many authors have made the case that politics in Western polities has entered a ‘populist zeitgeist’ (Mudde 2004) or ‘populist moment’ (Mouffe 2018), namely a phase in which populist tendencies tend to be more pronounced. Indeed, populism appears to be a ubiquitous tendency in contemporary politics and society writ large. It has been most famously seen on the political right, with the rise of right-wing populists or ‘national-populists’ being a strong and disruptive development coming to a peak during the second half of the 2010s (Katsambekis 2017). But there has also been much discus- sion about the parallel rise of a ‘left populism’, and the spread of populism as a logic also to social movements and other political actors (Mouffe 2018).

The semantic ‘capacity’ of the term ‘populism’ makes it both all-encompassing and slip- pery. There has been, and there continues to be, an intense discussion about the meaning of populism with different approaches trying to grapple with this notion. The two most influential are the discursive approach put forward by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and the Essex School of Discourse Analysis, on the one hand, and the so-called ideational approach intro- duced by Cas Mudde, on the other. For Laclau (2005) and Mouffe (2018) populism is not an ideology, but rather a certain political logic that is central to the way democracy operates, and the way in which it involves an appeal to the people as the totality of the political community. That populism is not an ideological phenomenon is testified, for Laclau, by the fact that any attempt to identify either a coherent platform or a coherent base of support for populist move- ments will fail. Whenever we analyse populism, we are faced with great heterogeneity of con- ditions and an abundance of exceptions to the rule, which frustrate any attempt to formulate in substantive terms what is meant by the term. In so doing, populism is posited as an abstract and almost transhistorical logic that applies virtually to any context and historical era, under the context of national-popular democracy. For Mudde the matter is quite different. Coming from a more traditional political science background, the Dutch scholar has argued that populism is akin to a thin-centred ideology (2017). This means that while populism lacks the systematic and coherent character normally attributed to ideologies such as socialism, communism and liberalism, it is organized around a set of nonetheless substantive ideas and discourses such as the ‘pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’. These different understandings of populism, as we shall see, carry important consequences for the way we approach the nexus between populism and digital technology.

The other question thrown up by the discussion about digital populism is indeed the role of ‘the digital’ as a qualifier. In recent years there has been much discussion about the digital transformation of society. The diffusion of the internet starting in the late 1990s and of social media starting in the late 2000s and early 2010s have had a major impact on everyday life and social relationships. It is sufficient to consider that more than half of the world population is on social media and that US citizens spend an average of over six hours per day on digital media, by now double the time people spend watching television (Nielsen Total Audience Report 2021). Facebook and Twitter, in particular, have firmly established themselves as a central platform for political communication, not only for militants of different political

creeds but also for parties and politicians, which use their official Facebook pages and Twitter accounts as a key means of political communication (Hong and Nadler 2011; Larsson and Moe 2012). Their influence has grown spectacularly in recent years, initially among young people (Duggan and Smith 2016; Gottfried and Shearer 2016) but progressively encompassing all age cohorts. Social media has revolutionized much of our everyday experience in production, consumption, social and sentimental relationships. They are part of what is sometimes described as a ‘digital revolution’ which has revolutionized contemporary capitalism, in which four out of five of the largest US companies for market value are digital (Apple, Microsoft, Alphabet, Amazon). We live in a ‘platform capitalism’ (Srnicsek 2017) in which our economic system and social experience are profoundly defined by the presence of digital technologies and services of the most disparate kinds.

This trend has engulfed virtually all spheres of social activity: from the way we work, we consume, we communicate, to the way we socialize, maintain contacts with friends and engage in relationships. Among the many domains that have been invested by the disruption produced by social media, politics is certainly an important one. Social media have become a growing source of political information and opinion for citizens. They have also seen the development of new forms of campaigning and specific tactics that have substantially changed some of the ways in which the battle for political consensus is performed. In recent years much discussion has focused on all sorts of new digital political phenomena, and in particular on those that seem to have a pathological character. Examples include fake news and online disinformation (Quandt et al. 2019) that are widely reputed as having played an important role in the rise of Trump and other populist phenomena, or the spread of hate speech and aggressive behaviour online often linked to the rise of the far right in the US and other countries.

There are two ways in which the nexus between social media and populism can be approached: an instrumental and a cultural one. These two perspectives map onto the difference between what media theorists James Carey called the ‘transmission and ritual model of communication’ (2008). The former looks at communication as a more or less neutral channel through which messages are transmitted, whereby the medium has little importance for the content of messages. The ritual model of communication instead approaches media as involved in a social process of construction and reproduction of society. Research following the first model of communication is the one that is prevalent to date. It approaches social media as an arena of communication within which populist messages are circulated but with limited effect on these contents. The second perspective instead is more concerned with the intertwining of communication and organization, and the way in which social media are accompanied by a transformation of social relationships, which implies societal conditions that are conducive to populist movements. I will now turn to summarizing the merits and limits of these two approaches.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A MEGAPHONE FOR POPULISM

The instrumental perspective pictures social media as a megaphone through which populist messages and mobilizations can be amplified. This perspective is useful to make sense of the effectiveness of populist communication on social media. This has been particularly evident in the case of the populist right (Engesser et al. 2017a). In Europe, right-wing populists enjoy high online popularity compared to other leaders (Bracciale et al. 2021; Ceccobelli et al.

2020). In the US, Trump's use of social media for campaigning purposes played a pivotal role in his stunning 2016 victory over Hilary Clinton, more so given the narrow margins with which that victory was achieved. Although outgunned by Clinton in fundraising and having spent a fifth of her campaign on television election ads, Trump managed to prevail, also thanks to his ability to win on the social media battlefield (Faris et al. 2017). Further, Trump has famously used his Twitter account as a means to issue highly politicized and sometimes threatening messages, before Twitter decided to close it in the aftermath of the 6 January 2021 attack on Congress. This social media prowess owed, on the one hand, to the ability of the central communication team and the use of sophisticated profiling techniques such as those used by Cambridge Analytica, and on the other hand, to informal networks of grassroots support, constantly churning out memes, slogans and videos in support of Trump.

The effectiveness of populists in using social media as a means of communication has not been limited to the right. Similar trends have emerged in the nexus between left populism and protest populism and social media. Figures such as Pablo Iglesias in Spain, Bernie Sanders in the US, Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France, Jeremy Corbyn in the UK and Alexis Tsipras in Greece (Prentoulis 2021) have often been described as left-wing populists. These figures have availed themselves of social media affordances and managed to gather sizeable followings online, appealing to social media publics that were not available to them on mainstream news media.

Many scholars have argued that the key in the rise of populist movements has been the barrage of disinformation seen in many recent campaigns from Brexit to Trump's presidential campaigns (Engesser et al. 2017b). This has arguably allowed the populist right to engage in discourses that would have been censored on mainstream media, expanding practices of 'dog-whistling' (i.e. racist messages couched in allusive rather than explicit language). Furthermore, it has allowed right-wing populists to give a free pass to their supporters engaging in highly incendiary comments if not altogether overt hate speech. On social media, right-wing populist parties and candidates can claim they have no responsibility for the toxic discourse of their followers, while at the same time inciting it. Conversely, on the left, social media have offered a space where issues of economic inequality and crisis of democracy, that were not covered on mainstream news media, can be brought to the attention of the public.

Right-wing populists are well known for employing various negative campaigning tactics such as rhetorical debasement (Ott 2017), mockery of political adversaries (Gross and Johnson 2016) and the targeting of immigrants (Kamenova and Pingaud 2017; Serrano et al. 2019). What is important in these practices is not simply the process of disinformation, but also the way in which these forms of negative campaigning contribute to identity-building. Social media have played an important role in the construction of identity and support and for the antagonizing of various enemies, in particular migrants (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Hameleers 2019). Negative campaigning on social media offers many opportunities for this process of identity-building. An example is Matteo Salvini's Facebook page, which often antagonizes immigrants and sea-rescuing non-governmental organizations (Berti 2021). On the left, instead, much anger has been directed on social media towards business elites accused of growing poverty and social disarray. An example is the campaign video game *Fiscal Kombat* produced in support of Mélenchon in 2017 in which the left presidential candidate fights against the rich and tax evaders.

Within this instrumentalist explanation of the relationship between social media and populist movements, another reason for the conduciveness of social media is found in the emotion-

ally charged tone of the latter and the way in which it seems to offer opportunities for populist candidates. It has been widely discussed how, when compared with mainstream media, social media have a strong personal and interpersonal profile that makes them particularly conducive as a conduit for emotional communication (Papacharissi 2015). Emotions of the most disparate kind are now embedded in social media communication and allow political parties and candidates to communicate such different emotional content as anger, hope, outrage and compassion. An example is offered by emojis now increasingly used in many social media messages, which express in iconic form a variety of basic emotional states, conditions and attitudes. This emotional communication is important in understanding the way in which support for leadership is constructed in populist movements. This is a crucial task given the charismatic dimension of this logic of mobilization. Examples include manifold short clips circulated on social media with demands for radical social change, or pictures shared on Instagram and Twitter showing the leader in a more endearing light, as an ordinary individual, and constructing an image of authenticity, transparency and commitment to the public good. Emotionally charged communication is highly effective for populist movements in order to recruit disgruntled voters who do not feel represented by mainstream political parties (Bartlett 2014). They allow a channel to mobilize core supporters and then ensure that their enthusiasm is spread to the wider base of support. However, the connections between populism and digital communication reach much further than the conduciveness of social media to emotionally charged messages.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A POPULIST ECOLOGY

Social media are not merely a ‘tool’ that, for whatever reason, seems to prove more effective in the hands of populists. They can be approached as technological systems that involve a certain social condition, a certain system of social relationships, which provides a fitting space (rather than just a channel) for populist motives to develop. This more ecological understanding of the relationship between social media and populism is the hypothesis that I have been pursuing in my work on this issue (2018), trying to bridge insights from digital sociology with work done in political communications and political theory. This perspective offers some ways to approach the questions: (1) Why has populism become so prominent precisely now, at this historical point in time, rather than previously? (2) What kind of structural conditions and societal dilemmas in populist movements are revealing and mobilizing? And perhaps the most important question: (3) How are contemporary populist movements different from previous waves of populism, for example, nineteenth-century Russian and US populism, or mid- and late twentieth-century Latin American populism?

To develop this line of inquiry, it is necessary to develop an understanding of digital media as not merely an instrument, and not just a technology involved only in communication, but a wide-ranging technological structure that directly affects the system of social relationships and connected organizational forms. The very word organization, from the Greek word ‘organon’, implies that in any organizational process there is something technical or machinic at play. And, indeed, different technological conditions create the basis for different forms of organization. For example, the mass political party of the twentieth century is enabled by the rise of the press, the modern post system and the telephone, which allow for a type of socio-technical assemblage that was previously impossible. Following Marx, we can say that

technology is a ‘world fact’, namely the introduction, diffusion and establishment of certain technologies is a pervasive phenomenon that does not affect societies only at specific levels but rather rearranges their general functioning (Fuchs and Mosco 2015). In economics, as Marxist analysis has highlighted, this affects the ‘mode of production’ of a given society. For example, the development of new technologies such as the steam engine was crucial in ushering capitalist relations of production. The diffusion of new technologies intervenes in redefining the interpersonal and collective social relationships that are extant in society at any given point in time. This has important consequences for politics, as it redefines the very terrain on which propaganda and mobilization efforts unfold. Two apparently contradictory yet ultimately converging tendencies need to be taken into account in this regard: networked individualism and networked communitarianism.

That digital technology favours individualization has been a constant leitmotiv of much sociological research on digital media. For Barry Wellman, specifically in a digital society, it is the person, rather than the place that becomes the portal of social life (Wellman et al. 2003). Similarly, for Manuel Castells, we live in times of growing individualism in which people are positioned across different networks rather than within different groups (Castells 2002). This tendency towards individualization, which has also constituted an important thesis put forward by the likes of Zygmunt Bauman (2013) and Ulrich Beck (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), is particularly evident on social media. Social media are in fact fundamentally personal media, which are defined on the basis of individual access. The individual becomes the basic unit of organization, the centre of one among billions of ‘ego-networks’ that punctuate the social experience of these platforms in which individuals are connected to hundreds of other individuals as part of their own networks.

This individualization sets conducive conditions for the communitarian appeals that are typical of populist movements. Thereby, by communitarianism I mean drives that attempt to unite people not at the level of social groups (as defined in terms of class, profession, gender or educational status), but at the level of the community in its entirety. These are seen in the rhetoric of mobilizations that present themselves as open to everyone and encompassing everyone. This typical populist and communitarian rhetoric is seen both on the left, as in the famous opposition of the 99 versus 1 per cent proposed by Occupy Wall Street, and on the right, with nationalist appeals used by several right-wing populist movements that allegedly present themselves as standing for the community as a whole; from solidarity campaigns such as #jeSuisCharlie or #BringBackourGirls, to various nationalist mobilizations or other campaigns that appeal not to a specific section of society but virtually to all, to the community in its entirety. This tendency is interesting from the standpoint of populist movements because it evidently chides well with the claim of populist movements to represent the people, the collective subject from which no citizen is excluded.

In my previous work, I have referred to what I described as an elective affinity between populism and social media (Gerbaudo 2018), meaning not only that the two have matched one another, but that to keep with the metaphor of the elective affinity, originating from the field of chemistry, both populism and social media have changed in the process of encounter, leading to a populism that bears the mark of social media tropes and attitudes and to social media platforms whose dominant culture and expectations have been strongly shaped by the irruption of populist movements of all kinds, sometimes also forcing social media companies to heed demands for further regulation, leading them to establish community guidelines, and stamping public discourse with the emotional intensity and polarization typical of populist movements.

This affinity is not just structural but also ideological. Social media discourse was from the start impressed with a celebration of the amateur and authenticity (Keen 2011), or what I describe in terms of social media as the *voice of the people* or *vox populi*, which was counterposed against mainstream media, accused of being elitist, aloof and uninterested in the actual experiences of ordinary people. It is apparent that this discourse of the amateur resonates with much of the worldview of populism; its idea of the ‘corrupt elite’, to quote Mudde (2017), in this case seen as the force that controls the media and the penchant to give a voice to the voiceless, to the ordinary people who do not feel represented by political elites. Populist movements tap into this continuous drive to resolve the extremes of conditions of atomization into a situation in which people can temporarily feel part of communities. What makes social media a particularly powerful organizational tool revolves around its capacity for aggregation and amassing of large numbers of people. This is what I describe as social media acting as a people’s rally or as a funnel for political participation (Gerbaudo 2021). What is meant by this term is that social media acts as a space in which communities of interests can be formed by focusing them around common reference points such as hashtags or filter bubbles (Pariser 2011). This is very important for purposes of mobilization because it means that people can be gathered online before then moving towards offline gatherings, such as rallies, protests, demonstrations or other forms of campaigning.

Another sociological element of social media that is important for understanding why social media are so fertile for populist movements is disintermediation. Social media are built around the principle of disintermediation whereby people are made to communicate directly with one another with no traditional gate-keeping mechanisms as would be the case on traditional mainstream media. The real functional innovation of social media is self-publishing, namely the way in which users by pushing a button can ‘post’ their ideas without these ideas being vetted for their value or filtered in advance. Disintermediation seems to be well aligned with the populist logic and its suspicion of intermediate structures. This is also in line with the paradigm of digital democracy in which digital technology is often seen as a means to overcome a stale representative democracy and achieve a greater degree of directness and disintermediation (Hague and Loader 2005).

This modus operandi of social media as a space of disintermediation chimes well with the logic of populist organization that often carries a distrust of intermediary bodies and layers and a direct connection between the leaders and the base, in particular for the ‘party oligarchy’ decried by Robert Michels for its Byzantinism (2017). These reservations uttered by Michels a century ago are once again evident in what I have described as ‘digital parties’, new templates of political organization, many of them associated with populist movements such as Podemos in Spain and the Five Star Movement in Italy. These parties have developed decision-making platforms in which the base of members is consulted periodically on different issues that have strategic importance. These forms of direct democracy have a strong plebiscitary tinge to them. While appealing to each individual in separation, rather than working in a more collective manner as with the delegate democracy of traditional mass parties, these forms of democratic participation are the point of connection between individualism proper to social media interactions and the digital condition and communitarianism that is instead proper to populist movements of any denomination. Alongside social media conversations, these platforms have offered a site in which the voice of individuals angered at the political system can be aggregated and made part of a political community. In other words, on social media, populism has not only found an effective sword (to keep with the metaphor of the

instrumental model of communication) but also a convenient battlefield, whose shapes befit its logic of mobilization.

This turn of events is ironic given that social media were initially seen as the pinnacle of the neoliberal project with its celebration of individual ingenuity, creativity and entrepreneurialism, and with its suspicion of collectivism and collective organization. Yet, the ultimate failure of that discourse in its rocky encounter with material reality, and the personal hardship experienced by people who were promised economic advancement only to be plunged into the economic recession and stagnation in the aftermath of the 2008 Great Financial Crisis, means that the subjects that were supposed to be bearers of the neoliberal project have instead become the perfect protagonists of a populist narrative: *the amateurs of yore have become the trolls of today*. The digital society is a society of extreme individualization, yet it is also a society marked by communitarian tendencies, where the drive towards atomization and the fact that individuals become the basic units of social organization are paralleled by a tendency to compensate this by means of communitarian convergence. These are perfect conditions for populist movements to arise and grow.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have addressed the nexus between populism and digital transformation. I have highlighted that the debate has centred on an instrumental approach to the way in which populists exploit social media communication and the way they seem to have been more effective in this than mainstream candidates. I have shown that two different lines of explanation have been developed to account for this relationship, based on two different theories of media and its social effects. The first theory takes an instrumental view and approaches social media as a tool by means of which populists can broadcast their messages. This tool is attributed a certain set of characteristics, but its effects are approached as limited to the level of political communication, with a focus on the different affordances they open up, and the connected political or communication opportunities they offer. Social media are seen more as a sort of neutral medium through which messages circulate, its main effect deriving more from its mass scale than from any particular type of social media affordance. This political communication approach to social media and populism has yielded some interesting general findings that are relevant for appreciating this relationship. Specifically, the latter concerns the role of social media in the construction of identity and the framing of the other as the enemy, the operation of social media as a ground for mobilization and the role played by emotions and the charismatic style of communication used by populists. However, this approach is limited in capturing the general structural background for social media conduciveness to populism.

A more perceptive approach is now emerging, which reads the nexus between social media and populism as a more systemic and holistic phenomenon. In this context, social media effects need to be approached sociologically, in light of the way they have led to growing individualization, and ideologically, on the basis of the discourse that has accompanied social media since their inception, emphasizing the power of the amateur and distrust towards institutionalized knowledge. From this standpoint, it can be better understood why social media have offered such a fertile social ground for populist movements to thrive. Further, it becomes easier to capture how the individualism of social media interactions combines with the communitarianism present in many populist movements. All in all, this order of explanation

provides important insights about the historically specific profile of contemporary populism, how it reflects the condition of societies that are highly technologically developed yet caught in stagnation and decline, experiencing a growing gap between the rich and the poor, which chimes well with the populist framing of a struggle between the people and the elites.

While there are some signs that the populist moment of the 2010s has perhaps run out of steam, societies affected by a profound crisis of representation and high social inequality as those we are living in are perhaps bound to see the rise of many different populist phenomena in the future as well. And with social media becoming an ever more pervasive feature of our system of social and political communication, digital platforms are likely to be the main site where these phenomena will unfold. Hence, the examination and understanding of ‘digital populism’ will continue to be a key issue for sociologists and political scientists.

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43. Populism, music and the arts

Anna Schwenck and Mario Dunkel¹

INTRODUCTION

Scholars in disciplines ranging from musicology and sociology to anthropology and media studies take very different approaches when it comes to defining the relationship between populism and the arts. However, most generally agree that the arts can imbue populist politics with affect, elicit concerted movement and support collective emotional experiences. Likewise, most hold that the arts transmit political meanings, although the question of when, in which contexts and how they do so is a subject of heated discussion.

In this chapter, we give an overview of the major debates on the relationship between populism and the arts. We understand the arts as the entirety of popular, middle- and high-brow artefacts, practices and experiences. Research on populism and the arts can be divided into two main strands. First, there are approaches centred on political actors, which investigate the use of the arts by politicians and political organizations. These include artists when they operate as political actors. Second, there are arts-centred approaches that consider the political dimensions of artistic practices, asking how artistic practices relate to systems of meaning, orders of knowledge and ‘structures of feeling’ (Williams 1983). The two strands are not mutually exclusive, but can complement one another.

In recent years, many researchers have analysed how politicians use the arts, including music, to further their cause. Populist performances by elite politicians, staging the antagonism between ‘a pure people’ and ‘a corrupt elite’ (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013; Müller 2016), have attracted particular attention. Ever more elite politicians seek to style themselves as being in touch with the cultural tastes of the working and poorer classes, exploiting forms of what is commonly called ‘low culture’ to further their political aims (Ostiguy 2017). Likewise, politicians have come to the defence of artists criticized for their racist, nationalist or misogynist works, thereby seeking to normalize these dehumanizing ideologies by presenting them as a legitimate part of ‘the people’s’ culture (De Cleen 2016: 82).

Such analyses of how populist politicians capitalize on the ‘low’ or ‘popular’ connotation of specific artworks contrast with studies that support a quite different thesis. These emphasize how extreme right actors with populist leanings strategically use ‘progressive aesthetics’ – styles, forms and sounds commonly associated with emancipatory and liberal politics. The argument is that they aim to take the edge off their anti-democratic programmes (Ginkel et al. 2022; Hornuff 2019; Nagle 2017), veiling their continuation of white supremacist, anti-Semitic and misogynistic legacies.

That two such contradictory claims on the role of the arts in populist politics exist side by side is related to scholars’ increasing references to the concept of ‘populism’. Once primarily used to describe South American politics, and contributing to post-Marxist critical theory, the concept is increasingly used as a catch-all term denoting the electoral success of extreme right-wing parties (Berezin 2009: 26). These different conceptual histories will keep challeng-

ing students of the arts-populism nexus to justify why populism provides a fruitful lens for their analyses and to define what makes specific politics or uses of the arts populist.

Our overview of the field reflects the recent surge in studies of exclusionary populist politics – meaning those politics that are commonly paired with nativist, nationalist and extreme right political programmes. However, we also include examples from studies of inclusive populist politics. The latter usually revolve around collective mobilizations rallying for the inclusion of hitherto marginalized categories of people in political decision making or against a neoliberal capitalist order that benefits the few to the detriment of the many. In particular, social movement scholars have pointed to the importance of aesthetics for such collective mobilizations. Certainly, defining ‘a people’ creates a metaphorical space for folkish interpretations of the (common) people (Schwenck 2023), and the figure of thought underlying populism, pitting a pure people against a corrupted elite, shares structural characteristics with anti-Semitic conspiracy theories (Roepert 2022). Nevertheless, a deepening of democracy can hardly be imagined without calls for more power to ‘the people’, especially in contexts where a fundamental redistribution of wealth is to be achieved through popular vote (Madariaga 2020; Rueschemeyer et al. 1992).

In what follows, we group the existing debates on populism and the arts, with a focus on music, into the two main strands outlined above: *political-actor-centred* and *arts-centred* approaches. We begin by discussing some overarching links between the arts and populism, with an emphasis on popular arts.

LINKS BETWEEN THE ARTS AND POPULISM

There is a tension between the concepts of the arts and populism that lies at the core of any discussion of their relationship. Since the nineteenth century, the notion of art has been intertwined with attempts to distinguish ‘real art’ from common, ordinary, non-European and non-Western art. Art history has been complicit with these attempts. According to Donald Preziosi, art history ‘has been deeply invested in the fabrication and maintenance of a modernity that linked Europe to an *ethically superior aesthetics grounded in eroticized object-relations*’ (2009: 503). Art history established class-based lines of distinction between ‘high art’ and popular cultural expression. In contrast to this history of ‘art’ as a tool for social distinction, we define the arts here in an encompassing way – ranging from classical music and oil paintings to popular songs and graffiti. On this basis, we attend to the symbolic struggles through which artworks or genres become culturally coded as pertaining to ‘the people’ or ‘the elite’.

The concepts of populism and popular arts overlap insofar as both linguistically refer to ‘the people’. Both are derived from the Latin term for the people, ‘populus’, as well as the late Middle English ‘popular’, which means ‘prevalent among the public’. At a conceptual level, too, the terms are kindred. Knowledge of popular music and art alongside a classical canon has indeed become the novel marker of high social status – what Richard Peterson identifies as distinction through ‘omnivore’ art consumption (1992). Nevertheless, the concept of ‘the popular’ still connotes ‘cheap’, ‘crude’, ‘low’ or ‘working class’, and communicates a reference to the culture of the masses (Becker 2018: 2).

Popular arts are modes of expression that appeal to wider publics. Political actors are aware of the social and political power entailed in the ‘judgements of tastes’ and the related ‘practices

of [social] distinction' analysed by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984). The performance of popular songs and dances, and the usage of popular images, form a regular part of popularization efforts, that is of attempts to mobilize supporters and to create feelings of community as well as 'communities of feeling' (Berezin 1997). Artistic artefacts and practices can endow political events with affect, thereby reaching out to audiences beyond a merely cognitive level. As a practice that is tied to group experience and invites one to engage in collective actions such as singing and dancing, music is especially suited to evoking such affectivity (Wetherell 2013).

Those understandings of populism that define it as a political style, a performance (Moffitt 2016) or a type of political conduct staging a 'flaunting of the low' (Ostiguy 2017) suggest that popular arts make for an especially salient field in the analysis of populist politics. However, although 'popular' and 'populist' are etymologically related, we must distinguish them carefully. One central dimension of this distinction lies in the way in which the relationship between 'the people' and 'the elite' is mobilized in a performance. If populist performances construct and reaffirm an antagonism between these two imagined actors, popular performances may or may not do so. The popular exists in relation to a 'power bloc', but is not necessarily antagonistic to it (Dunkel and Schiller 2022: 3–4).

Popular arts are not only contested in terms of their capacity to draw class boundaries. As Angela McRobbie highlights, evaluations of specific art forms are coupled with gendered, ethnic and racialized meanings (2009: 70). Critical histories are key here, shedding light on where, when and among whom a transnational culture may become popular. As Bodo Mrozek shows for Germany, cosmopolitanism has not been an elite project, but a popular cultural taste. Disproving claims by the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD) that 'the elites' imported a cultural cosmopolitanism, he traces how members of the working classes cultivated a cosmopolitan orientation in music long before their 'elite' fellow citizens followed their lead (Mrozek 2019).

Likewise, studying the processes through which specific arts and genres received their gendered, ethnicized or racialized reputation makes it possible to disrupt the power of exclusionary populist political performances. This involves unpacking how popular arts are instrumentalized to normalize notions of 'the common people's culture' as mixophobic, heteronormative and rooted in the gender binary (Priester 2008: 21–22). For instance, a continued tradition of popular folk songs among South Africa's white Afrikaners appears to stabilize a patriarchal notion of the white Afrikaner people that is designed to keep 'femininity white and in heterosexual check' (Van der Westhuizen 2017: 195). In this light, music seems of even greater relevance to the populist postures of Julius Malema, the head of the South African party Economic Freedom Fighters. Malema reactivates the memory of historical struggle songs, which were sung regularly by liberation fighters opposed to the deeply racist apartheid regime, to bolster his politics (Gunner 2015; Resnick 2017). The history of armed resistance to the extreme violence of the apartheid state, encapsulated in such songs, helps Malema inscribe himself in a history of struggle, bolstering the legitimacy of his persona in fights over political power (Gunner 2020). At the same time, the figure of the male black hero who appears in such songs is key to his construction of an ideal of the contemporary South African black person as a heterosexual fighter for black people's economic empowerment and his insistence on the gender binary. Politicians like Malema instrumentalize the language of decolonization to create the notion of a traditionally homogeneous and heteronormative African culture: they present homosexuality as a Western import, as not having been traditionally 'popular' among

the country's African ethno-linguistic groups and therefore as un-African (Zulu 2019). Such claims obscure regional variations, deny evidence that same-sex relationships were tolerated in pre-colonial Southern Africa but were persecuted by colonial powers (McNamara 2018) and neglect the apartheid state's obsession with heteronormative whiteness (Carolin 2017). This suggests that Malema's claim is part of a populist performance seeking to profit from an aesthetic reference to 'what the people like' – that is, he plays with the limited public support for South Africa's constitutional right to same-sex marriage and paints a patriarchal profile of Nguni cultures as an authentic tradition to mobilize against a 'liberal elite'. With such politically disparate examples of populist performances, the South African case is a reminder to differentiate clearly between the populist quality of political performances and their ideological pedigree. As De Cleen (2016) warns, analysis of populism should by no means result in flattening the differences in ideology between the extremely heterogeneous currents using populist strategies to further their cause.

This relates to the need to examine more critically in which ways politically divergent actors construct the culture of the 'common people' to suit their political – and often conservative – agenda. Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár's theorizing on social and symbolic boundaries (2002) is a valuable tool to examine the construction of the people through discourse and practice. Building on Bourdieu, the two sociologists emphasize that the drawing of symbolic and social boundaries is a contested process. The concept of boundaries is especially relevant for political-actor-centred approaches to the study of populism and the arts. At the same time, arts-centred approaches are pivotal for analysing the ways in which specific artefacts, songs and performances are popularized. How does their specific artistic or musical materiality facilitate their adoption for some populist political purposes but resist others? How are their meanings collectively negotiated, and what are the processes of normalization that eventually elevate them to a position in which they are regarded as familiar (Schober 2020; Ylä-Anttila 2017) or recognized as pertaining to a 'stock of "our" culture' among certain audiences?

Both directions of research are key to creating bodies of social scientific knowledge which (1) illuminate how populist political actors construct 'the people' and (2) show how specific genres and artworks become culturally coded as pertaining to 'the people'. Because populist political claims can change political imaginaries, they are more than strategic bets by political actors on the tastes and preferences of 'the people' (see also Csigó 2016). Such claims popularize gendered, ethnicized and racialized notions of 'the people', insisting that some categories of people are 'really the people' (Müller 2016: 21) and therefore deserve a more influential position in society vis-à-vis others (Enroth 2020: 253).

Social scientific research must evaluate the relationship of such claims to historical and present realities of structural exclusion. How legitimate are demands that some categories of people, allegedly previously and presently excluded, should be included more fully in the *demos*? Because there are actual histories of social exclusion continuing into the present (Coplan 2009), usages of the popular as a tool of populist political contestation touch upon the painful fact that the project of egalitarian inclusion of 'all' in the democratic body politic is unfinished (Enroth 2020). In this regard, popular art forms are significant cultural resources for progressive social movements, rallying to include the previously excluded in democratic politics. Their calls for inclusion centre on the universalism of liberal democratic personhood (Brown 2015: 206).

To those excluded from democratic processes, popular arts are a crucial resource for mobilization. As such, the study of popular arts (which we have called arts-centred approaches)

is crucial to document the political expressions of those excluded from powerful mediating institutions such as unions, universities, the media or large-scale cultural production such as cinema (Ranger 1975). A recent example is activists' and researchers' engagement with so-called Afrikaaps Hip Hop, transcending boundaries between artistic, activist and scholarly work in the attempt to bring previously excluded voices into public debates (Haupt et al. 2019). The mobilizing power of the arts in forging new political coalitions between people who demand to be represented in democratic processes is well documented. In South Africa, songs turned into powerful tools for political change (Schumann 2008). As Omotayo Jolaosho shows, Southern African struggle songs have continued valence as a memory of ordinary people's power (2019). She also highlights how situational musical improvisation during protests for better services (for water, electricity, food) can forge new coalitions. The power of improvisation is also highlighted in Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison's (1998: 4) classic sociological account of music's role in the US Civil Rights Movement:

In 1959 at the end of a workshop at Highlander [Center in Tennessee] the local police burst in, and somebody started to hum 'We Shall Overcome'. In the heat of the moment, a young female high school student from Montgomery, Alabama, began to sing a new verse, 'We are not afraid' and, according to Bernice Johnson Reagon, this helped give the song 'new life and force'.

Such examples underline the need to theorize how the aesthetic and political dimensions of social protest coalesce (Barber 1987: 5). A greater emphasis on the aesthetic dimension of political protest has shaped some strands of social movement studies focusing on music (Eyerman and Jamison 1998), visuals (Doerr et al. 2015), storytelling (Polletta 2006) and character work in movement narratives (Jasper et al. 2020).

Novel research cuts across the disciplinary boundaries between art history and political science to explore how 'the people' as the central character in populist mobilizations is depicted (Schober 2020). As art historian Martin Warnke argued for the European context, at least since the writings of Machiavelli, holders of power in church and state have used visual representation to affirm their domination and legitimate their rule (Fleckner et al. 2011: 8–9).² Visuals were also used to legitimate 'the people' as sovereign after the eighteenth-century democratic revolutions in Europe, a practice that proved particularly difficult, as any inclusive democratic depiction of the people must portray the people as being one and, at the same time, diverse. This difficulty, which artworks such as Tarsila do Amaral's portrayal of workers attempted to solve (Diehl 2018), relates to the difficulty of uniting so-called ordinary people without suppressing difference in inclusive populist movements.

The long history of artistic depictions of democracy reveals that democracy was often rejected because it would empower 'ordinary' or 'poor' people; those deemed 'not fit enough' for political decision making and suspected of being prone to demagoguery and corruption (Enroth 2020; Warnke 2011). As evidenced by the first election campaigns of the US-based populists in the nineteenth century, this specific form of populism (whose protagonists called themselves 'populists') thrived on an inversion of this elitist, anti-democratic attitude. The 1890s US populist party depicted their candidate on posters as the architect of an egalitarian society, promising 'Equal Rights to All, Special Privileges to None', and democracy as winning over the power of finance capital. Democracy was represented allegorically as a powerful woman in a white dress attacking finance capital, given the form of a kraken, with the help of an axe (Mueller 2011). The image of the kraken can be interpreted as anti-Semitic, implying that the financial elite was dominated by Jews who should no longer be allowed 'special privileges'

– though it should be noted here that anti-Semitism was endemic to a variety of US political currents at the time.

As these examples show, artistic production provides a lens through which populism's kinship to democracy becomes more visible (Müller 2016) – along with the dangers of its anti-elitism, when anti-Semitic and conspiracist visuals are employed to pit an apparently good people against a supposedly corrupt elite.

MUSIC'S SPECIAL ROLE IN POPULIST MOBILIZATIONS

Due to its everyday ubiquity and affective potential (DeNora 2000), music is central to the nexus between populism and the arts. This is obvious in the myriad ways in which it has been used by populist political actors. For one, populist politicians seize the opportunity to associate with the celebrities produced in and through musical cultures. The Italian far-right populist politician Matteo Salvini has done so repeatedly, for instance, claiming that he admires the iconic cantautore Fabrizio de André (Magaudda 2020). Politicians also pursue the strategy of performing a particular 'popular' taste. By performing their own alleged musical tastes and the cultural identities associated with them, politicians may communicate a proximity to certain groups in their electorate. For example, the Israeli politician Miri Regev has strategically endorsed popular music styles that match the musical preferences of her party's traditional supporters (Erez 2022).

Politicians use music to associate themselves with specific groups in diverse political contexts. The success of Barack Obama's 2008 campaign, for instance, has been attributed to a populist communication strategy. According to Matthew Jordan, 'The Obama communications team aimed to structure populist feelings by linking Obama and his platform with a broad range of popular songs' (2013: 101). While Obama exemplifies how a centrist politician may develop populist campaign strategies, similar musical strategies are employed by right-wing politicians. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, for instance, has tried to profit from the mainstreaming of *arabesque* music in Turkey by associating himself with the music of iconic singers such as Ibrahim Tatlıses (Zervas 2021).

Contemporary populist politicians do not exclusively rely on 'low' music – that is, music preferred by or associated with the working classes. In general, music used in campaigns by populist political actors tends to be varied. Donald Trump's 2016 campaign relied on music ranging from Bruce Springsteen's 'Born in the U.S.A.' to the aria 'Nessun dorma' from Puccini's opera *Turandot* (Sinderbrand 2016). Parties' musical politics may shift, as in the case of the right-wing Hungarian Fidesz party. While its 1990 election campaign was accompanied by Roxette's international hit 'Listen to Your Heart', it has more recently employed music from the far right (Barna and Patakfalvi-Czirják 2022).

Besides election campaigns, demonstrations and rallies are occasions where music's affective dimension may influence political process. The music used in these contexts can be eclectic. Its selection depends on the ideologies with which populism is combined in specific political situations. The various kinds of music employed at demonstrations may also be used with different affective purposes in mind. While some music may give meaning to a glorious cultural history of 'the people', thus contributing to the construction of a positive group identity, other kinds of music can strengthen social cohesion by performing a shared scenario of threat. The German far-right party AfD, for instance, has used Islamic religious music at

demonstrations to create a sonic other by using sounds people may experience as foreign. Cultural threats which would otherwise be abstract are thereby rendered audible – in this case the alleged ‘Islamisation of the Occident’ (Dunkel 2021). Demonstrations organized by syncretic populist parties – i.e. ‘political parties that are ideologically centrist and have a loose, flexible ideology’ (Downes and Xu 2020) – have additionally harked back to countercultural symbols from popular music history. For instance, in the early years of the Five Star Movement in Italy, the party organized a ‘*Woodstock Cinque Stelle*’ event (Woodstock 5 Stelle 2010).

The founder of the Five Star Movement, Beppe Grillo, a guitarist and singer, exemplifies the larger phenomenon of populist politicians performing as musicians. The politician-as-musician spectacle is widespread. It is closely related to the increasing significance of celebrity politicians and political celebrities (Cooper 2008; Street 2019). The rise of European populist parties since the 1990s has been accompanied, and perhaps facilitated, by politicians performing as musicians: the Austrian far-right politician Jörg Haider was known for singing folkloristic songs about his home region of Kärnten; likewise, Silvio Berlusconi’s rise as a centre-right populist politician was accompanied by his singing of Italian songs on television.

The conflation of political and musical personas can also come about when musicians become populist political activists. In Austria, for instance, the John Otti Band is considered to be inextricably linked to the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (Vogt 2015). Since most musicians are independent of political parties, pursuing often ambiguous political goals, it can be challenging to distinguish populist from non-populist musicians. Furthermore, because aesthetics of protest are common in many popular genres, the boundaries between popular and populist performances are often blurred. Some celebrity musicians, however, have unambiguously performed as populist political actors: Povia (Italy), Pablo Hásel (Spain), Xavier Naidoo (Germany), Zé Neto e Cristiano (Brazil) and Kid Rock (US) are prominent examples (Dunkel et al. 2019; França and Vieira 2021). When the roles of populist political actor and musician are conflated, singing can underpin the notion that a populist leader is ‘the true voice of the people’.

Finally, arts-centred approaches have concentrated on the subtle ways in which the arts may be involved in articulating populism. Here, relevant studies explore the potential for populism among particular artists (Rheindorf and Wodak 2019), within musical genres and in music videos (Savvopoulos and Stavrakakis 2022), in embodied practices in musical spaces such as folk-dance halls (Taylor 2021) and in everyday music cultures. Everyday music cultures are difficult to operationalize as a vehicle for or medium of populism. Nevertheless, this everyday approach responds to music’s ubiquity (Kassabian 2013). For instance, if populism is conceptualized as a practice of embodied sense-making – such as when people sing together to stage themselves as ‘the people’ (Schwenck 2023) – all kinds of activities which Christopher Small calls ‘musicking’ (1998) may be considered relevant areas of research. Given the increasing role of merchandising, the personas of popular musicians may extend into everyday encounters even when their music is not being played. In the case of the right-wing populist celebrity singer Andreas Gabalier, one of Europe’s largest online trading companies launched a Gabalier clothing collection, including neofolkloristic dirndls and lederhosen. Sociological research on everyday music cultures may therefore be a crucial arena for understanding how populism is articulated.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have categorized the existing literature on populism, music and the arts as pertaining to *political-actor-centred* and *arts-centred* approaches. Both are equally necessary to an understanding of how and in which situations the arts may serve as a vehicle for populist discourses or as a medium of populism.

We have argued that while ‘the popular’ and ‘populist’ are kindred concepts, there is a crucial distinction. ‘The popular’ is constructed in relation to a hegemonic situation or a ‘power bloc’, but is not necessarily antagonistic to it. Populist performance and practice, however, construct and affirm an antagonism between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, portraying these abstractions as relevant for processes of identification and politicization. Such processes build on histories of gendered, ethnicized and racialized ascriptions to genres and artworks, as well as to ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’.

More context-sensitive research is needed for a better understanding of how political actors from different factions and in different places construct the culture of the ‘common people’ to suit their agenda. Sociological work on social and cultural boundaries is an apt starting point for theorizing how populist political actors – be they individuals in a position of power or collective actors such as social movements – create or reproduce notions of ‘the popular’ in an antagonistic way.

Further investigations along the lines of what we call arts-centred approaches are pivotal because the arts, though widely perceived as a second-order reality, form understandings of the first-order reality insofar as they shape popular perceptions of how the social world is or should be. They thus have the potential to cement or change the first-order reality. This means that artistic pictures or photographs are more than mere representations of a potential political message. Likewise, it means that music’s relationship to society is more complicated than that indicated by metaphors of music being society’s mirror. Artistic works – from songs to pictures and memes – have a political life of their own, the study of which necessarily entails deciphering the social and political processes that shaped their creation, and which condition their reception in different times and places.

NOTES

1. We are grateful to Heike Becker, Sylvia Bruinders and Liz Gunner for pointing us toward much relevant literature from and about Southern Africa, which helped to de-provincialize this chapter.
2. This argument is in line with Warnke’s earlier criticism of art history, directed particularly towards the discipline’s role in post-Second World War Germany, which turned ‘art into a vehicle of order’ (Warnke and Elliott 2014).

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44. The populist hype

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INTRODUCTION

‘Populism’ has become a central notion in political, media and academic accounts of a variety of political developments and events, whether that be Donald Trump’s election and presidency, the outcome of the Brexit referendum or the political effects of the global financial crisis of the late 2000s. Echoing its supposed rise as a societal phenomenon, we have also witnessed the growing popularity of ‘populism’ as a label, concept and insult. A search of the Web of Science and Lexis databases for articles within academic publications and United Kingdom national newspapers containing populis* (populism, populist, etc.) in the title or frontmatter demonstrates this clearly: from 1069 academic and 1487 newspaper articles published in the ten-year period 2000–2009 to 6482 academic and 11319 newspaper articles in the subsequent decade 2010–2019 (see Figure 44.1). Most of these references appeared in the second half of the 2010s, with more articles published in both cases between 2015 and 2019 than in the entire 40-year period prior to that.

It is therefore hardly surprising that in 2017 ‘populism’ was declared ‘word of the year’ by the *Cambridge Dictionary*, for which it represented ‘a phenomenon that’s both truly local and truly global, as populations and their leaders across the world wrestle with issues of immi-

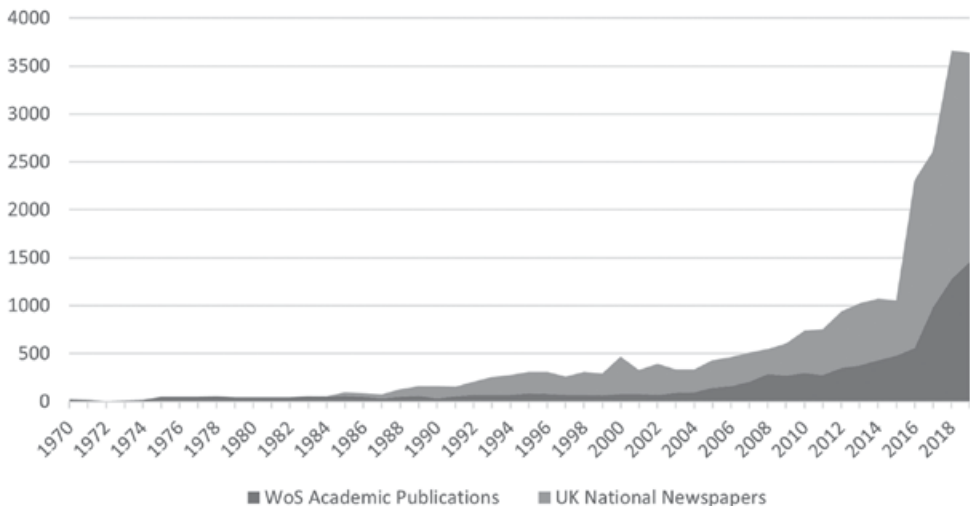


Figure 44.1 Uses of ‘populis*’ in Web of Science and Lexis searches

gration and trade, resurgent nationalism, and economic discontent' (University of Cambridge 2017).

There is no doubt that all the talk about populism in media, politics and academic work is partly a response to political events. However, it would be too easy to see the scope and intensity of debate about populism as a mere *reflection* of political developments. The *Cambridge Dictionary* rationale for selecting populism as its 'word of the year' already indicates that the word does not serve as a mere linguistic mirror of the '*phenomenon* of the year'. The selection can also be understood to be a product of a set of 'second-order' effects in which the talk *about* populism itself plays a rather prominent role in the further intensification of debates about populism. Populism has become an increasingly widespread framing device through which to understand a complex range of phenomena (including the 'economic discontent', 'nationalism' and 'immigration' mentioned by the *Cambridge Dictionary*), rather than merely a label for certain political and societal developments.

As has been argued elsewhere (De Cleen et al. 2018), populism can function as both a concept and a signifier. Approached as a *concept*, populism should be judged by its capacity to capture a particular dimension of social and political reality, a capacity that relies heavily on analytical precision. A sizable body of work has proposed, criticized, refined and combined a range of definitions of populism (for an overview, see Katsambekis 2022; Moffitt 2020). What interests us in this chapter is not the relative advantages and disadvantages of these conceptualizations, but the politics of the use of the *signifier* 'populism' across politics, media and academia.

Approaching populism as a signifier turns our attention to questions such as: why is the term 'populism' used so frequently? How does it acquire different and competing meanings in different discourses? What is its function in such discourses? What are the dynamic interrelations between different discourses about populism? And what is the politico-strategic and ideological significance of a focus on populism in politics, the media and academia? In discussing populism as a signifier, we draw on a growing body of work that asks critical questions about the ideological motivations underpinning discourses about populism. Going beyond ideological considerations informing much of this work, however, we also point to other intentional and unintentional factors that can account for the character of discourses about populism, including their dynamic interaction and propagation.

POPULISM, ANTI-POPULISM AND ANTI-ANTI-POPULISM: A QUESTION OF IDEOLOGY

In the last decade or so, as discourses about populism have become more widespread, there has been a growing awareness of the politics of the *signifier* 'populism'. This includes critical reflections about how academic conceptualizations of the term contribute to delegitimizing populist politics and defending mainstream political forces (e.g. Eklundh 2020; Goyvaerts 2021; Hunger and Paxton 2021; Jäger 2017; Stavrakakis 2017), how politicians use it to denounce their opponents (e.g. Brown 2022; Elmgren 2018), how journalists have used it and how – in a series of feedback loops – these uses have had an impact on each other (e.g. Bale et al. 2011; Brookes 2018; Brown and Mondon 2021; Goyvaerts and De Cleen 2020; Herkman 2017; Ronderos and Glynos 2022; Thornborrow et al. 2021).

Such enquiries have revolved around the question of ‘how the term is used, by whom and why, and with what performative effects’ (De Cleen et al. 2018: 652). Most of this work has been focused on the ideological and politico-strategic intentions and impacts of mainstream discourses about populism. The starting point for much of these reflections is an explicitly critical position towards the way the term ‘populism’ is commonly employed across the mediatic, political and academic fields to delegitimize political opponents as ‘populist’. This pejorative use of populism has many shades and gradations, and exists in more and less nuanced forms, but usually converges around a view of populism as a threat to pluralism, liberal rights and democracy.

While the term ‘anti-populism’ was already used in the 1980s to capture recurring features in the critique of ‘populism’ (e.g. Folkerts 1984), it has gained prominence since the late 2010s as some scholars turned what they consider the mainstream anti-populist position into an object of critical analysis in its own right (e.g. Jäger 2017; Kim 2018; Ronderos and Glynos 2022; Stavrakakis 2014; Stavrakakis et al. 2017; Venizelos et al. 2019; Zúquete 2018). Going against the predominantly negative evaluation of populism in academic work, scholars also argue that ‘populism and anti-populism mutually constitute each other’ and that it is ‘impossible to effectively study the first without carefully examining the second’ (Stavrakakis et al. 2017: 12).

The most frequent ideological critique of anti-populist discourse is that it constitutes a defence of a problematic status quo through the delegitimization of democratic alternatives as threats to democracy. Anti-populist discourse, the critique goes, uses the term ‘populist’ to delegitimize political alternatives to a status quo characterized by neoliberal socio-economic policies implemented in a technocratic and post-political manner that marginalizes genuine democratic choice. Moreover, these critiques of populism are said to strategically lump together left-wing alternatives and far-right forces as one single populist threat to liberal democracy (e.g. Cannon 2018: 486; D’Eramo 2013; Goyvaerts 2021; Jäger 2017; Katsambekis 2017; Stavrakakis 2018; Stavrakakis et al. 2017). Whilst much of these ‘anti-anti-populist’ (Zúquete 2018) reflections have been formulated from within a left-leaning, critical, often post-structuralist discourse-theoretical tradition – and in some cases also by authors on the (far) right of the political spectrum (e.g. Furedi 2017) – concerns about the problems with anti-populist positions have recently also gained some traction in more mainstream academic perspectives on populism that are characterized by a negative attitude towards populism, with some scholars extending their critique of the ‘moralizing’ and antagonistic nature of populism to the anti-populist position (e.g. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018: 1683).

Others have remarked that the use of the term populism – despite its oft-pejorative meaning – has helped mainstream the far right by diverting attention away from the (much more problematic) ideological core of the far-right project and by euphemizing ultra-nationalist exclusion and racism as ‘populism’ (e.g. Collovald 2004; Mondon and Winter 2020; Rydgren 2017). In response to the critique that they are populist, we have seen far-right figures such as Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini and Steve Bannon embrace the term. Their explicit ‘pro-populist’ position effectively acknowledges populism as a term that is less stigmatizing than other labels for the far right, suggesting also a readily exploitable proximity to ‘the people’. Indeed, the populism label has – again, despite dominant anti-populist intent – contributed to accepting the far right’s claim that they represent ‘the people’. The far right is criticized as ‘populist’ for appealing to racist and other problematic prejudices among ‘the people’. This, in practice, lends credence to their claim that they say what people think or want to hear (De Cleen et al.

2021), and it contributes to viewing ‘the people’ narrowly as the ‘white working class’ or ‘left behind’ who are supposedly represented by the far right (Mondon and Winter 2018).

Attesting to the ‘complex choreography between populism and anti-populism’ (Stavrakakis et al. 2017: 3), the strength of anti-populist discourse has also played a role in stimulating the production of discourses defending populism (see Zúquete 2018). These range from the above-mentioned critiques of anti-populism to more outspoken pleas for the development of a populist strategy. The latter have most prominently been formulated by left-wing authors who consider a populist strategy the only viable one to respond to both the populist far right and post-political technocratic neoliberalism (e.g. Mouffé 2018). Contesting the dominant pejorative connotation of populism, these authors aim to reclaim the signifier ‘populism’, stressing populism’s democratic potential and sometimes even questioning whether the ‘populist far right’ is really populist at all (e.g. Stavrakakis et al. 2017).

What becomes clear is that the struggle between the critics and proponents of populism is driven by ideological, not merely conceptual-analytical, considerations. Moreover, the increasingly reflexive discussion about the ideologically invested politics of the signifier populism has itself contributed to the ubiquity of debates about populism. Despite opposing positions as to the desirability of populism – or, indeed, because of them – all voices in this debate are part of a dynamic that continues to propel the expanding production of discourses about populism, to which this chapter itself can also be said to contribute. To grasp more fully such dynamics and the character of discourses about populism and their effects, we need to turn our attention to factors that go beyond ideology.

ON THE DYNAMIC EMERGENCE AND INTERACTION OF DISCOURSES ABOUT POPULISM: MOVING BEYOND IDEOLOGY

Whereas ideological and strategic intentions are certainly central to understanding the nature and ubiquity of discourses about populism, the complex manner in which politically opposed voices emerge and interact in these debates already indicates that to grasp the growth of discourses about ‘populism’ as well its effects, we also need to look beyond such intentions. Newspapers publishing special sections on populism, prominent dictionaries calling populism the ‘word of the year’, the plethora of academic conferences, books and special issues or the endless warnings by politicians against the dangers and threats of populism cannot be explained by appealing to their ideological investment in populism or anti-populism alone.

In part, we are dealing here with rather straightforward, yet not insignificant, ‘institutionalist’ explanations for the abundant production of discourses about populism. In the academic world, for example, some of the obvious explanations for the fact that ever more academics started to work on populism would be the ‘bandwagon effect’, propelled by the perceived need to address a pressing issue, turbocharged by associated publication imperatives and funding opportunities.²

Yet there are also other more complex and less tangible mechanisms and logics at play, with all who speak about populism being part of the *dynamics* of scholarly, media and political debate not reducible to political intentions or agent-centred calculations. To account for the character, scope, intensity and effects of the production of discourses about populism more adequately, we need to look at these dynamics within and across the spheres involved in that production. Many types of actors produce discourses about populism, but we can say

that the most important ones in terms of impact on the wider public political discourse are politics itself, the media and, to a lesser or less direct extent, academia. Here it is important to emphasize the need to find a language with which to characterize not only the *general* nature and significance of such dynamics, but also the socio-historical and institutional complexity and variety of their constitution. This means we need to look at *intra-sphere* processes of discursive production specific to academia, media and politics, for instance, citation networks among scholars. But we also need to look at *inter-sphere* processes that operate across these three spheres, such as academic commentary in media articles. Ideology and political strategy cross-cut these three spheres, but they interact with the dynamics specific to each, as well as with the more complex dynamic interactions between them (Zicman de Barros et al. 2022).

We can find in the recent literature some concepts that point to and attempt to capture the general character and significance of such dynamics. Yannis Stavrakakis (2017) and Anton Jäger (2017) consider discourses about populism through the lens of Anthony Giddens' concept of 'double hermeneutics'. This concept aims to grasp the mutual interactions between concepts used in the social sciences and concepts used in broader society: 'Social scientists... tend to shape the very objects they propound to observe' (Jäger 2017: 316) as their concepts impact on the self-understandings, discourses and practices in that society. This also implies that academic research analyses societal discourses and practices that have to an extent integrated academic concepts, knowledge and perspectives. Jäger and Stavrakakis mainly focus on the ideological dimensions of this: they use the notion of double hermeneutics to show the connections between the negative connotation of populism in academic work and in the broader fields of politics and media (Jäger 2017; Stavrakakis 2017). However, the notion of double hermeneutics can also help us understand the ubiquity of the concept of populism *per se* as it points towards a dynamic where 'all producers of discourses about populism operate in a house of mirrors, where academics, politicians, and journalists reflect and further reinforce each other's focus on populism' (De Cleen and Glynos 2021: 189; see also Zicman de Barros et al. 2022).

Another notion that captures the dynamic interaction between different, often competing, discourses about populism is that of a 'speculative bubble'. In his book *The Neopopular Bubble: Speculating on 'the People' in Late Modern Democracy*, Péter Csigó (2016) develops the argument that in a time where the more institutional and organic vertical ties between political parties and their constituencies have been eroded, we can observe what he calls a 'neopopular bubble' made up of academics, journalists, commentators, politicians, political strategists and other professional producers of discourse. In this 'bubble', he argues, different voices 'speculate' on what it is 'the people' think and want, and about how they relate to politics, but they end up referring mainly to each other. Whilst most of Csigó's argument does not explicitly engage with discourses about populism, his appeal to financial speculation bubbles to frame his approach to politics is of clear relevance for understanding the nature and sheer ubiquity of discourse about populism as well as the relations between academic, journalistic and political discourse.

Another concept that has recently been used to study the role of these top-down processes in constructing 'the people' and legitimizing and mainstreaming certain types of politics is that of 'mediation', building on Roger Silverstone's work (2002; see also Brown and Mondon 2021). As Katy Brown, Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter (2023; see also Block 2013; Brown 2022; Couldry 2003) note:

knowledge of our political context is always based on a mediated process. It would simply be impossible for any of us, no matter our level of education and access to knowledge, to hold an objective and complete view of all matters pertaining to local, national and/or international policy and politics. Political decisions must therefore be based on the limited and selective knowledge we acquire through others, whether these be politicians, the media, religious communities, trade unions, the workplace, family etc.

These studies link to Csigó's argument inasmuch as they seek to highlight how politics, often thought of as emerging through bottom-up processes and attributed to 'the people', is the result of far more complex mechanisms in which top-down mediation and the discursive interactions between different types of elite actors play a crucial role.

A fourth concept with which to approach the dynamics fuelling the emergence, interaction and effects of discourses about populism beyond ideology is that of 'populist hype' (Glynos and Mondon 2019). In the following section we aim to strengthen its conceptualization and flesh out some of the consequences the 'populist hype' has had, before teasing out a move 'beyond populist hype' in the conclusion.

POPULIST HYPE

The noun 'hype' is typically used to indicate a situation in which the degree of intensity of the publicity or attention for something (typically a product, idea or event) is considered extravagant and seen to exaggerate the importance, relevance and/or benefits of that which is hyped. The term 'populist hype' captures the way politicians, as well as journalists and academic commentators: (1) exaggerate the significance of populism through the sheer volume of content devoted to its discussion; (2) present a simplistic picture of the 'rise' of populism (with that 'rise' feeding and legitimizing the hype), for example, on the basis of selective and decontextualized uses of electoral results and polls; and (3) exaggerate the political and societal impact of populism *per se* (to the detriment of the substantive ideologies of different populist actors), usually by characterizing populism as such as an acute threat to democracy (see Glynos and Mondon 2019).

'Hyping' has a dynamic of its own, incorporating complex feedback loops that amplify the focus on a certain phenomenon within and across different spheres. In the case of populism, it is mainly politics, media and academia that interact with and influence each other to amplify the focus on populism. In the political sphere, for example, we have seen heated interventions against populism, with major politicians decrying the dangers of populism across political campaigns, book publications and media interventions. To give just one example among many, in 2015, then European Union president Herman van Rompuy famously called populism 'the greatest danger for Europe' (in Stabenow 2010). Such claims stimulate the further production of discourse about populism as media cover these statements, but also through the funding of conferences, debates and initiatives aimed at monitoring and fighting populism.

In the media sphere, we have seen a remarkable rise in attention to populism. Whilst such coverage is typically framed as a response to the force of populism in the political landscape, it is at least as much the result of media's involvement in a hype they have significantly contributed to, even though this is often not acknowledged. One good example of this can be found in one of the first articles published to launch a *Guardian* series on the 'New Populism' in 2018. It was titled 'Why Is Populism Suddenly All the Rage?', with the stand-first reading 'In 1998,

about 300 Guardian articles mentioned populism. In 2016, 2,000 did. What happened?'. This question renders invisible the *Guardian's* own agency in this process, with its editors failing to acknowledge the fact that it was ultimately their choice to publish 2000 articles mentioning populism in 2016 (and to devote a whole series to the 'new populism'). Instead, the reader is led to think that something external had led to this situation, whether it was the rise of 'populist' parties and 'populism', however understood, or demands from their readership to read more about 'populist' parties and 'populism', however understood (see Brown and Mondon 2021).

A hype about populism can also be discerned in the academic sphere. This becomes visible not only in the sheer number of articles, books and conferences about populism, but also in the tendency to focus on populism *per se*, most clearly illustrated by the appearance of a field of 'populism studies', with its own conferences, journal special issues and even dedicated journals. Recently, this emerging field of populism studies has been the object of some critical scrutiny. The main critique here has been that the focus on the populist dimension has drawn our attention away from other, more important, aspects of populist politics. Sophia Hunger and Fred Paxton (2021: 2), for example, in their study of over 800 abstracts of articles on populism published in political science journals, have drawn attention to the 'overstatement of populism at the expense of the host ideologies in the interpretation of research findings' (see also De Cleen and Glynos 2021; Dean and Maiguashca 2020; Rooduijn 2019).

It is true of course that hyping typically tends to be initiated by people who produce and promote a product or phenomenon, and who therefore also often stand to benefit from its promotion. In the case of populism, however, much of the observed hype comes from the massive attention trained on populism by voices *opposed* to populism. Although negative, this extensive attention also hypes populism, often with clear political and ideological effects, whether intended or unintended.

Populist hype, then, can be seen to function as a 'political logic'. Logics are 'constructed and named by the analyst' to identify and understand the 'rules or grammar of [a] practice' under study (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 136). For example, the term 'social logics' aims to capture the norms that constitute a practice in their relatively stable mode of existence. 'Political logics' on the other hand comprise processes that seek to strengthen, defend or contest those relatively sedimented social norms. Approaching populist hype as a political logic draws attention to how 'the dominant "hyped" response to the populist conjuncture by politicians and the media [and much mainstream academic work] has served to pre-empt the contestation of some of the norms animating the regimes of "really existing" liberal democracy', such as the norms of electoral democracy, and to contest other norms which many consider worthy of defence, such as the norms of presumptive equality, ethnic and otherwise (Glynos and Mondon 2019: 84).

At the same time, the notion of a populist hype – as a dynamic that goes 'beyond ideology' – also suggests that a heavy focus on populism can have political effects that are not reducible to the ideological intentions of the agents involved. Indeed, one reason for turning to the notion of 'hype' is that it points to a potentially open-ended range of political effects, both intended and unintended. Whilst typically driven by an ideological defence of liberal democracy against populism, this charged opposition to populism has also had the unintended consequence of strengthening the visibility and political impact of populist politics, thereby also risking wider acceptance of populists' claims that they represent 'the people' (see De Cleen et al. 2021).

Hype also draws our attention to how *all* participants in the debate about populism, be they anti-populist, anti-anti-populist or pro-populist, can contribute to the ‘hying’ of populism: ‘Talking about populism means approaching politics from a specific angle, reading the current political conjuncture in a particular manner, formulating populist and anti-populist strategies based on that reading, constructing and reproducing political cleavages on that basis, and then interpreting those through the lens of populism all over again’ (Goyvaerts and De Cleen 2020: 100). This is not at all to underestimate the very significant analytical and ideological differences between different approaches to populism, but merely to point out that these disagreements themselves can contribute to furthering the focus on populism and that this focus has (sometimes unintended) analytical as well as political consequences.

Some have noted that critical academics’ focus on populism has led to a process of abstraction and deradicalization of radical politics. In her feminist critique of populism studies, Bice Maiguashca wrote:

while populism is ultimately about securing, widening, and radicalising democracy (read pluralising it); for feminists the struggle must move beyond calls for participation, representation, and the recognition of demands, important though they are, and encompass the quest to both overturn intractable relations of subordination/marginalisation and to build a world of social justice, in general, and ‘gender justice’, in particular. (Maiguashca 2019: 779)

While populism studies are not homogenous and serious disagreement can be found within this field of study, it remains the case that in these studies, power is often thought of largely in liberal democratic terms, particularly regarding the primacy attributed to electoral politics. Paying attention to the political logic of populist hype thus enables us to see more clearly how it can reinforce not only a rather narrow electoral conception of democracy, but also how the hyping of a populist right-wing threat can – through the sheer volume of repetition – serve to weaken the hold of norms we value, such as the norm of ‘presumptive equality’ (Glynos and Mondon 2019). More generally, however, Maiguashca (2019: 784) points to how populism, as a concept, runs the risk of being co-opted by branches of academia that still place considerable faith in the tradition of ‘positivism and an exclusive commitment to streamlined definitions and impactful, empirical, and policy-related research’. In these branches of academia, ‘Thicker, historically and sociologically inflected, inductive forms of theorising, of the kind that feminists have argued for, do not seem to be part of the agenda’ (Maiguashca 2019: 784). Although recent work demonstrates how it is indeed possible to engage in the study of populism in a way that is compatible with a feminist impulse that is historically and sociologically informed (Biglieri and Cadehia 2021; Gunnarsson-Payne 2020), it is still relevant to consider the challenges posed by the logic of populist hype in helping to foreground issues of gender inequality.

Similar to the sidelining of feminism Maiguashca points to, the same could be said of more radical approaches to racism in the growing field of populism studies (see Mondon and Winter 2020). Just as the hyping effects of academic analyses and antagonistic media reporting of populism can inadvertently erode the norm of presumptive equality along the gender axis, we can see this political logic at work along the ‘race’ axis as well. While this is witnessed in political science more generally, and far-right studies more specifically, the refusal to engage seriously with the concept of racism in the field of populism studies is striking, as more often than not what is called ‘right-wing populism’ would in fact be better described as racism or white supremacy, a label that could encourage scholars to build on a much more developed and

sophisticated body of literature, theory and empirical work (see Mondon 2022). This would in turn prevent the creation of false equivalences between so-called left- and right-wing populism as if both were equal threats to what is good, as many anti-populists are prone to assert, and many anti-anti-populists have refuted. The inclusion of all remains impossible without dismantling white supremacy and its prior acknowledgement and recognition. In the current context, the colour-blind approach to populism (Bonilla-Silva 2006) understands racism as an aberration, something outside of the liberal hegemony and even opposed to it, rather than as something inherent to the current hegemonic constructions of ‘the people’.

CONCLUSION: BEYOND POPULIST HYPE

Moving beyond a focus on populist discourses, the ideological significance of discourses *about* populism has become an important concern in critical studies of populism. In recent years, the ideological and politico-strategic dimensions of discourses about populism, especially anti-populist ones, have been fleshed out and subjected to significant critique. At the same time, not much attention has been paid to the wider dynamics underlying and perpetuating debates about populism, although there have been some interventions which push in that direction, exploring (primarily) the ideological dimension of the character, scope, intensity and significance of the performative effects of discourses about populism in politics, media and academia (e.g. Cannon 2018; De Cleen and Glynos 2021; De Cleen et al. 2018; Dean and Maignushca 2020; Eklundh 2020; Glynos and Mondon 2016; Rydgren 2017; Stavrakakis 2017; Zicman de Barros et al. 2022).

In this chapter we have argued that while it is crucial to better understand the ideological dimension informing discourses about populism, we need to also consider factors ‘beyond ideology’ if we are to understand their dynamic interactions and political effects across media, politics and academia. We briefly noted how the concepts of double hermeneutics, speculative bubble and mediation have been used to elucidate these dynamics. These ideas point, respectively, towards the two-way interactions between academic work and the political phenomena they analyse, the tendency of discourses about ‘the people’ to get drawn into a self-referential bubble detached from the phenomena they describe and the role of elite mediatic discourses in constructing ‘the people’ and its ‘will’. We then turned our attention to the notion of populist hype, showing in more detail how it can help us understand the ubiquity of discourses about populism and better appreciate their intended and unintended effects.

Whilst we have argued for the need to incorporate factors ‘beyond ideology’ to characterize this hype, including its dynamics of emergence, political logic and effects, it is still worth making some more targeted suggestions about how it is produced and sustained from a socio-historical and institutional point of view. This might involve mapping out in a more precise way *social* and *fantasmatic logics* that produce and sustain this hype, both within and across each of the three spheres we have canvassed. Looking at the media and politics spheres and their intersections, quite apart from various ‘revolving door’ logics that see practitioners move within and across these spheres, there are other imperatives that sustain and amplify the hyped nature of discourses about populism. For example, it is arguable that more antagonistic and sensationalist forms of discourse about populism tend to be selected when journalistic practice and the logics informing the political economy of the media are underpinned by profit-making imperatives (see Krämer 2014, 2017). It has also been argued that ‘the tenacity

of populist hype – and its continued role as a political logic – indicates how it has successfully tapped into potent affective registers rooted in collective desires and fantasies’ (Glynos and Mondon 2019: 85).

Turning to the academic sphere, we could say that its omnipresent publication imperatives point towards a social logic that applies not only to ideals of publishing in academic journals and publishing houses but extends also to various forms of ‘knowledge exchange’ ideals. These imperatives encourage academics to publish in prominent media outlets which generally demand arguments to be framed within the bounds of ideologically hegemonic mainstream language and debate. It also extends to various ‘impact’ ideals that encourage academics to put their ideas into practice by engaging with practitioners, including politicians and policymakers, again tending to favour work that does not depart too much from hegemonically sustained ideological bounds. Many of these imperatives, moreover, are increasingly embedded in reputational and career progression logics that, in turn, reinforce tendencies within and across spheres, thereby helping to sustain and further amplify the populist hype.

It is arguable that similar worries about hyping can be expressed in relation to other sub-fields in the social and political sciences. Consider gender studies or nationalism studies, for example, where we can certainly see how the signifier ‘gender’ and ‘nationalism’ can become part of a wider set of discourses about gender, or about nationalism, whose intra- and inter-sphere dynamics – ideological and ‘beyond’ ideology – can produce corresponding hypes. Rather more so than gender and nationalism, however, the term ‘populism’ captures only one very specific dimension of otherwise substantively very distinct political phenomena – a view supported by a consensus in the literature on populism, ranging from the ‘thin ideology’ to the ‘discursive’ perspectives on populism. For this reason, it could be said that ‘populism is particularly unsuited to serve as the central nucleus of a field of study’ in and of itself (De Cleen and Glynos 2021: 191). It implies that studies of populism are – and should be seen as – only ever partly about populism, and at least as much about more substantive ideological traditions (e.g. the radical left, the radical right) and about broader institutional or cultural norms (e.g. regarding democracy or equality) that are being promoted or contested.

In closing this chapter, we emphasize that the kind of considerations about the signifier ‘populism’ we have discussed do not undermine efforts to promote the relevance of the concept of populism in capturing a particular aspect of political reality. Nor does our argument suggest that the considerable body of work on populism needs to be superseded by a new line of work centred around the signifier ‘populism’. The concept of populism certainly has a role to play in academic enquiry. Our chapter simply encourages a more self-reflexive stance that suggests scholars use the concept of populism in a precise and modest manner (as much good work on populism already does) but also foregrounds how the very use of the signifier ‘populism’ is not above, but part of, a much wider set of dynamic processes and effects that are both ideological and ‘beyond ideology’.

NOTES

1. Parts of this chapter draw substantially from the following earlier publications: Brown and Mondon 2021; De Cleen and Glynos 2021; De Cleen et al. 2021; Glynos and Mondon 2016; Goyvaerts and De Cleen 2020. All authors contributed equally to this chapter.
2. According to Google Scholar metrics, of the top 20 most cited articles published in the top 20 most cited political science journals over the last five years, 23 (more than 5 per cent) contained

‘populis*’ in their title. Ten of these were in the top three articles for the respective journal, and no less than five were the most cited of all. In the media sphere, meanwhile, populism sometimes seems little more than a catchy word in a headline (see Brown and Mondon 2021).

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45. Diffusion and global circulation of populist discourse

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INTRODUCTION

There is little doubt that populism constitutes a global phenomenon that displays different facets across the world (de la Torre 2019). In Latin America, populism has come in three waves (Burbano de Lara 2019; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017), while Cas Mudde (2013) identifies four waves in far-right politics in Europe. Benjamin Moffitt (2016) goes beyond the regional and argues that populism has become relevant on five continents, emerging as a truly global phenomenon that manifests specific features in different countries but shares certain aspects, exhibiting a sort of ‘family resemblance’.

Despite the increasing acknowledgement of the global dimension of populism, there is a dearth of studies on the interactions between populist forces around the globe. The few important exceptions include recent discussions of the global dimension of populism (e.g. Moffitt 2016), interventions which have focused on populist diffusion on a continent (e.g. de la Torre 2017a; Rydgren 2005), diffusion of populism in the press (e.g. Rooduijn 2013), the Latin American origins of European left-wing populism (e.g. Alcantara and Rivas 2019; Schavelzon and Webber 2018) and transnational populism (e.g. De Cleen et al. 2020; Moffitt 2017). However, there is no general theory of diffusion and circulation of populism focusing on the interaction between political forces from different world regions. The aim of this chapter is to address this research gap by developing a theoretical framework that is useful for analysing the dynamics of diffusion and global circulation of populist discourse.

We follow the contemporary contributions on populism of the political-discursive (de Cleen 2019; Laclau 2005) and the ideational approaches (Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Seen in this light, populism should be thought of as a discursive logic or thin-centred ideology that combines two central elements: the appeal to ‘the people’ as a privileged political subject emerging from the articulation of unsatisfied demands; and a critique of ‘the elite’ (Stavrakakis 2017). In other words, populism is a kind of political discourse that conceives of society as divided between ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, where the former is presented as the ultimate source of political legitimacy (Mudde 2004). However, unlike other political discourses or ideologies, populism does not have a specific content or policy platform. Instead, it constitutes a contingent discursive articulation, so that one can identify left-wing and right-wing versions of populism in differing contexts.

We recognize the discursive character of populism, which can be contingently articulated with a wide variety of political orientations. In this sense, it is possible, first, to distinguish populism as operating at a local or regional scale. Notice, for example, political phenomena like Ada Colau’s left-wing new municipalism in Catalonia (Thompson 2021) or Lega Nord’s right-wing regionalism in Italy (Zaslove 2011), among others. Second, at a national level, one can identify the ethno-nationalism of right-wing populism (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017)

on the one hand, and the anti-imperialism of left-wing populism on the other (de la Torre 2017b). Third, there is an international scale of populist operation related to the coordination and cooperation of populist forces (De Cleen et al. 2020), like the left-wing European movement *Now the People!* (García Agustín 2020) and both right-wing European Parliament groups *Identity and Democracy*, headed by the French National Rally of Marine Le Pen, and *European Conservatives and Reformists* led by the Polish party *Law and Justice* (McDonnell and Werner 2019). This category can also include groupings between populist governments, like the case of the *Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America* in Latin America (de la Torre 2017b). Lastly, there is a discussion of the possibilities and limitations of transnational populism, which entails the discursive construction of ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ at a transnational level (Moffitt 2017), as the discourse of political forces such as *Democracy in Europe Movement 2025*, formed by Yanis Varoufakis, exemplifies (De Cleen et al. 2020).

As already mentioned, the aim of this chapter is to develop analytical tools useful for studying the diffusion and circulation of populism across the world. The chapter is structured in three sections. First, we elaborate a theoretical framework able to account for the diffusion and circulation of ideas, in general, and populism, in particular. We consider the contributions of the literature on the diffusion of public policies and collective action frames, the theory on the circulation of ideas and the sociology of translation, engaging with the novel literature on diffusion and circulation of populism. Second, we illustrate our conceptual, theoretical and methodological argument with two cases: *Podemos* in Spain and its relationship with Latin American left-wing populism; and José Antonio Kast’s *Partido Republicano* in Chile and its connections with the populist radical right of the Global North. Finally, we summarize the main points of the chapter and develop some ideas for future research on this topic.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our theoretical argument starts with the reflections of Carlos de la Torre and Manuel Anselmi (2018) on the diffusion of populism as an understudied research area, because it transcends the formalistic definition of populism. According to them, ‘the answers based on the formal components of populist discourses, ideologies, or strategies are insufficient because populism spreads in waves not only within geographical regions, but also across the world’ (de la Torre and Anselmi 2018: 468). Thus, to understand the diffusion of populism it is necessary to recognize that this formalistic and discursive logic spreads with some specific content – such as ideas, demands, frames, intellectuals, symbols and public policies – in waves.

Identifying waves, as temporal and spatial clusters of uncoordinated interdependence of political agents (Elkins and Simmons 2005: 35), is key to examining the diffusion and global circulation of populism. In this sense, the ‘idea of populist waves that emerge and simultaneously shock several countries suggests the presence of mechanisms of diffusion, learning, or contagion’ (Rovira Kaltwasser 2015). Hence, populism is a symptomatic phenomenon related to crisis (Moffitt 2015) being ‘diffused through discursive frameworks that offer common solutions to overcome economic and political crises’ (Burbano de Lara 2019: 435).

Following Doug McAdam and Dieter Rucht (1993), diffusion can be understood as ‘the acceptance of some specific element, over time, through the adaptation of individual–group–community units, which are linked to external communication channels, and between them through the structure of social relations and systems of values or cultures’ (Katz 1968, in

McAdam and Rucht 1993: 59). In other words, the process of the diffusion model assumes the existence of emitters, receivers, some element that is diffused (ideational or material) and diffusion channels that make this exchange possible.

The contributions by Jens Rydgren (2005) and Steven Van Hauwaert (2019) on the diffusion of the populist radical right in Europe are relevant here because they allow us to explain how the incorporation of new discursive elements differs from the older versions of the far right, such as fascism. Therefore, the populist radical right discourse operates as a general interpretative scheme or master frame (as an articulation between anti-elitism and ethno-nationalism) that relates and synchronizes different demands and allows political parties to emerge around certain ideas. This view posits a series of structural elements – the political regime, the electoral system and citizens' trust in institutions, among others – that reveal the emergence of the party family of the populist radical right in Western Europe as the result of the diffusion of a master frame that was adapted or translated according to the different contexts and reaching different levels of success depending on the structural elements mentioned.

Similarly, Carlos de la Torre (2017a) analyses the diffusion of Bolivarianism from Hugo Chávez in Venezuela to other countries in South America. He distinguishes a series of processes of emulation, learning and influence that allowed countries like Ecuador and Bolivia to translate a model or master frame of left-wing populism centred on constitutional changes, state intervention in the economy and anti-imperialism. Thus, de la Torre recognizes a process of continental diffusion in which countries with eroded democratic institutions and crises of representation were more likely to incorporate these elements in contrast to countries with more stable liberal democratic institutions where left-wing populism was not emulated.

The literature on the global dimensions of populism and its diffusion circulation has advanced the notion of populism as a 'master frame'. Following the theory and analysis of discursive-cognitive frames, a frame is an interpretative scheme or discursive structure that by synthesizing ideas can become a powerful resource of mobilization (Aslanidis 2018: 445). This concept has been used in social movement studies to understand the frameworks that structure collective action and mobilization cycles from the elaboration of a diagnosis and prognosis of a situation to the formation of collective identities (Snow and Benford 1999). In this vein, frame analysis recognizes, on the one hand, a behavioural dimension (tactics and repertoires) and, on the other hand, an ideational dimension (frameworks that define goals and objectives) (Kolins et al. 2010). Thus, a master frame would correspond to a general language that allows the different action frames to be brought together, making them all resonate around common elements. In other words, a populist master frame is a general rubric of blame attribution, goals and solutions (Aslanidis 2018) which can resonate in different socio-political contexts at local, national and transnational scales.

Distinguishing between *restrictive* (focused on closed ideas) and *elaborate* (more flexible and inclusive) master frames, Paris Aslanidis (2018) understands populism as a flexible master frame that provides a common language based on an anti-elitist discourse on behalf of popular sovereignty, addressing a series of unsatisfied demands at a domestic and transnational level. In this way, he introduces an understanding of populism centred on its ability to make a set of diffuse frames that can be employed in cycles of social mobilization. Following Rydgren (2005), the notion of a master frame explains both cycles of social mobilization and the formation of new political party families. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that the emergence of populist master frames that circulate between different countries is associated with cycles or waves of specific populist projects located temporally and geographically.

Although it is true that populism can be thought of as an elaborate, broad and flexible master frame that allows mobilizing an extensive set of social groups (Aslanidis 2018), it is worth noting that populism does not usually appear in a ‘pure’ form, but instead needs a ‘host ideology’ that contains a political programme attractive to broader segments of the electorate (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). So, a populist master frame spreads together with other political discourses. That explains their inclusionary or exclusionary appeal. For instance, in Latin America one can observe different configurations of the populist master frame with other discourses such as neoliberalism in the second wave of populism and radical socialism in the third wave of populism in the region. In a nutshell, populism does not circulate alone, but rather in combination with a set of elements that are translated into different socio-political contexts.

In a similar vein, the theory of circulation of ideas (Bourdieu 1999) suggests that there are fields of production of specific ideas as well as fields of reception that allow for reinterpretations of existing discourses. This process follows a logic of transfer from the domestic to the foreign, consisting of a series of operations. In addition, Pierre Bourdieu identifies the existence of ‘gate-keepers’ with specific interests or agents with similar positions in both fields that generate alliances based on elective affinities or mutual social admiration. Thus, Bourdieu establishes processes of symbolic capital circulation in different directions, where agents seek to appropriate certain capitals to influence their respective fields. In some instances, structural homologies facilitate the transfer of ideas. However, in most cases, transformations and deformations of circulating ideas occur due to the ensuing strategic uses.

This theory has been used to study the transatlantic diffusion of left-wing populism and the influence of the third wave of Latin American populism on the Spanish political party Podemos. This process is analysed by Laura Chazel (2019) as an import mechanism of circulation from the Global South to the Global North, which occurred from a direct interaction based on social admiration between the founding members of Podemos and the Latin American governments of the third wave of populism (Alcantara and Rivas 2019), as well as on the influence of Ernesto Laclau’s theory of populism (Damin and Petersen 2016). Therefore, the incorporation of the so-called ‘populist hypothesis’ by the Spanish party consisted of a process of adaptation of concepts such the ‘national-popular’ and, especially from Bolivia, of the concept of plurinationality (Chazel 2019). This reveals that the diffusion of populism, as a master frame that contains the populist core elements and a host ideology, can circulate in different directions from the South to the North and vice versa.

The different adaptation of populist discourses around the globe takes us to the concept of translation. Following Rydgren (2005: 431), the process of adapting the master frame of populism requires the frame to resonate in different cultures and political systems, allowing a ‘creative modification’. Thus, to understand the processes of global diffusion and circulation of populist discourse between different contexts, it is necessary to emphasize the translation processes through which populism in its various versions, as a master frame, is adapted across contexts and regions. The diffusion of political ideas and policies involve a process of innovation constrained by certain context-specific, pre-existing logics or bounded rationalities (Weyland 2006, 2019). In other words, translations allow us to ‘reframe’ what has been disseminated, allowing us to understand the variations of the circulating elements.

In his study of neoliberal diffusion, Cornel Ban (2016) highlights two relevant elements to understand translation processes. First, the transnational socialization of agents, who accumulate material, status and institutional resources through their socialization in networks of

actors that allow local translation. However, ‘translators’ may belong to networks that are in dispute, making translation processes more complex. Second, the importance of institutional cohesion and whether the different institutional translators go in the same direction or if there is fragmentation between the relevant actors. In sum, the local translation of globally diffused elements is subject to existing ideational and institutional factors (global or regional) that determine how the diffused elements are reframed. This is relevant to our theory, because the different translators of populism are involved in networks of transnational and international social interactions but are also constrained by institutional and cultural factors.

In this vein, political agents at a local, national or international scale are involved in the formation of transnational networks with other political agents from other contexts. Thus, ‘networking, for any political party, represents an important political activity particularly on an international level, functioning as a crucible for the exchange of ideas and information on policy and praxis’ (Macklin 2013: 177). In other words, the existence of international and transnational networks facilitates the connections and learning processes between political forces of different contexts, becoming more complex and faster through the development of the internet and social networks as communication channels (Caiani 2018).

The formation of transnational networks has been studied in diffusion theory related to the existence of epistemic communities. However, to critically explain the diffusion and circulation of populism, it is necessary to have a more flexible definition of epistemic communities than the traditional approach as ‘a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain’ (Haas 1992: 3). Instead, following Jennifer Ramos and Priscilla Torres’ work on the study of the transmission of ideas and practices of the far right between the United States and Europe, we consider epistemic communities as social networks with shared values, knowledge, practices and political beliefs that are not based on expert knowledge and do not ‘necessarily reflect evidence-based reasoning’ (Ramos and Torres 2020: 91). In other words, different political actors as political parties, non-governmental organizations and international meetings of leaders and militants, among other instances, produce the formation of networks that work as epistemic communities, which facilitates the diffusion and circulation of populism.

In summary, in this process of diffusion and global circulation of populism, any iteration produces reductions and amplifications, maintaining the core elements of the populist master frame through the process of translation. Hence, we propose that the dynamics of diffusion and circulation of populism are mediated by the formation of transnational networks of agencies, in which populist discourse, as a master frame, becomes a circulating reference to be later translated by political agents in multiple ways within the different socio-political contexts where populist discourses emerge.

EMPIRICAL ILLUSTRATION

To illustrate this conceptual, theoretical and methodological framework, it is necessary to identify cases highlighting the formation of networks of agents and organizations in which populism circulates together with its host ideology. To do this, we focus first on Podemos in Spain and its connections with Latin American left-wing populism. Second, we illustrate a similar process with the emergence of the populist radical right in Chile in the case of José Antonio Kast’s Partido Republicano.

Podemos in Spain: From the Global South to the Global North

Podemos can be analysed through our theoretical framework as a process of diffusion and circulation of left-wing populism. The latter can be defined as those discourses centred on the common people as ‘the underdogs’ or ‘plebeians’ in opposition to the political and economic elites – discourses which emphasize egalitarian and inclusionary dimensions associated with the political traditions of socialism and communism and seek the transformation of capitalist societies (Katsambekis and Kioupiolis 2019; March 2011; Mouffe 2018; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). The master frame in the case of Podemos was formed based on a combination of the populist logic with socialist ideas related to the third wave of populism in Latin America. Through the articulation of this kind of discourse, Podemos was able to formulate the so-called populist ‘hypothesis’ as an ideational innovation in the Spanish context (Gómez-Reino and Llamazares 2019).

A process of diffusion and circulation of populism is evident in the social admiration the founders of Podemos held for the third wave of Latin American populism, which arose in response to the implementation of neoliberal policies in those countries. After the 15-M mobilizations in Spain prompted by the 2008–2009 economic crisis, Podemos’ political leaders decided to incorporate the populist jargon in a parliamentary context. Therefore, a process of circulation from a region to a country occurred. The Centre for Political and Social Studies (Centro de Estudios Políticos y Sociales), located in Spain, played a crucial role in this process. The Centre had a strong relationship with Latin American left-wing governments and constituent assemblies that articulated a populist discourse with strong anti-capitalist tones (Martínez 2019).

The populist ‘hypothesis’ is related to three main elements that travelled from the Global South to the Global North. First, we have a concept of ‘the people’ seeking to articulate a wide variety of demands and groups that escape traditional class categories – for example, the indigenous in Bolivia. In the same way, this concept of ‘the people’ is associated with a resignification of the notion of the homeland (as understood previously by the Spanish right), which in Latin America was embodied by a charismatic leader with an anti-imperialist rhetoric, such as Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador. Second, the discursive construction of a ‘corrupt elite’ that threatens popular interests is identified around two interrelated concepts: (1) the notion of *la casta* (the caste), referring originally to the Bolivian oligarchy but which the leaders of Podemos adapted early on, most likely from their readings of the Bolivian theorist Rene Zavaleta Mercado (Campo García and de la Fuente 2019); and (2) we have anti-imperialist ideas closely linked to anti-neoliberalism and recognizing the Northern powers as causing the precariousness of the popular sectors. Finally, the concept of plurinationality would also travel from Bolivia, a concept which Pablo Iglesias and Íñigo Errejón marked as a helpful tool for representing the Spanish reality (Campo García and de la Fuente 2019).

Following Fruela Fernández (2018), the diffusion and circulation of left-wing populism from the Global South to the Global North can be understood as a translation of the Latin American experiences to the European context. The influence of Ernesto Laclau (Damin and Petersen 2016) and Alvaro García Linera, offering alternative readings of Antonio Gramsci’s conception of hegemony, permitted an innovative twist in Podemos’ discursive construction of the notion of ‘the people’ through the concept of plurinationality and the conception of the elite as *la casta*. However, even though the conception of the people or the homeland as

plurinational acquired political potential within the Spanish context, the strong nationalist appeal of the right around the signifier the ‘homeland’ (*la patria*) and the discourses of political independence in Spain’s autonomous communities made this process of translation difficult. This reinforces the idea that translation is a complex process, highly influenced by the context, specially, after Podemos’ incorporation into the Spanish government as a partner of the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party in 2020.

The Partido Republicano in Chile: From the Global North to the Global South

Conversely, the case of José Antonio Kast’s Partido Republicano in Chile entails a diffusion of the populist radical right from the Global North to the Global South. This type of populism can be defined as a political discourse centred on the notion of the ‘common people’ as a homogeneous community that is oppressed by the political and cultural elite. As the seminal work of Mudde (2007) has shown, the populist radical right articulates populism with authoritarian and nativist ideas, advancing thus an exclusionary project that seeks the restoration of a ‘heartland’ lost in the ongoing transformations related to the process of globalization (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013; Taggart 1995).

José Antonio Kast’s Partido Republicano is a novel political vehicle that competed in Chile’s 2021 election and won 15 seats in the House of Deputies and one in the Senate. Moreover, Kast obtained 27.9 per cent of the first-round vote in the presidential race of that year, making him the most voted-for candidate. While he lost the second-round election, his project has become quite attractive to an important segment of the electorate. It is worth noting that Kast represents a clear innovation in the Chilean right-wing camp. His agenda incorporates elements of the populist radical right from the Global North (both from Europe and the United States), such as an appeal to the ‘common people’, understood as the silent majority at odds with the political and cultural elite – portrayed as progressive politicians, intellectuals, the mainstream media, feminist activists, etc. – that denies the traditional values of Chilean culture (Campos 2021; Rovira Kaltwasser 2019).

Since its emergence, the Partido Republicano has formed an Ibero-American network with other far-right political forces. Preliminary investigations have shown that this novel populist radical vehicle remains close-knit and has an affinity with parties such as Vox in Spain (Urban 2021) and Jair Bolsonaro’s presidency in Brazil (Ramos 2021). This circulation network is built on the Madrid Forum (Foro de Madrid), conceived as a reaction to the left-wing São Paulo Forum (Foro de São Paulo). The Foro de Madrid is led by the president of Vox, Santiago Abascal, and Kast was a signatory of the *Carta de Madrid* along with many other right-wing political leaders in the Ibero-American sphere (Foro de Madrid 2020). Moreover, José Antonio Kast has shown sympathy to other far-right political forces such as Law and Justice in Poland and Victor Orbán’s presidency in Hungary (Albin 2021). At the same time, it is no coincidence that the Chilean Partido Republicano has built strong ties with the United States Republican Party, modelling its leadership style after the figure and leadership of Donald Trump with, for example, Kast’s campaign promising to build a ditch along the frontier between Chile and Bolivia to prevent migration. Interestingly, there are also links with Christian groups within the United States Republican Party when, for example, during the 2021 presidential campaign, José Antonio Kast met with Ted Cruz in Washington, DC.

Even though we observe a process of diffusion of the populist radical right master frame with many similarities to other parties in Europe and North America (Campos 2021), this is

not a mechanical or automatic process, since it is mediated by translation logics as well as the bounded rationality of political actors in Chile. For example, after the popular revolt of October 2019, the Partido Republicano portrayed the protests as pure vandalism and demanded the deployment of the military, taking an antagonistic position against the movement (Durán and Rojas 2021). At the same time, Kast and his party advanced a harsh critique of the Communist Party of Chile and other left-wing actors, who were depicted as authoritarian forces willing to implement a Cuban/Chavista programme in the country. Seen in this light, although it is true that Kast presents himself as an innovation, the bounded rationalities of the Chilean right wing make it difficult for him to take a different position on the popular revolt from the rest of the Chilean right; he thus resorted to Cold War-era political jargon (Weyland 2019).

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have argued that populism is a multi-scalar phenomenon with global dimensions that can appear locally, nationally and transnationally, acquiring a variety of ideological orientations and degrees. This means that populism can be thought of as a political discursive logic or thin-centred ideology that pairs with a host ideology and operates as a master frame that can be disseminated and circulated at the global level through transnational networks of agents who translate this master frame in a variety of ways in different socio-political contexts. Through illustrative cases, we examined how populist discourse is disseminated by the formation of transnational networks of political agencies in which populism circulates together with elements such as ideas, theories, demands, frames of action, intellectuals, symbols and public policies. Thus, the emergence of populism is mediated by logics and dynamics of diffusion, circulation and translation.

Our conceptual/theoretical framework and the potential of the proposed methodology to illuminate empirical conjunctures could be expanded, first, by the study of further, different cases than those studied in this chapter, such as the diffusion of right-wing and left-wing populism in the United States during the presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump's presidency and the role of the Democratic and Republican Parties in these processes. In Latin America, suitable cases might include Jair Bolsonaro's presidency and his connections with the far right of the Global North and Chile's Frente Amplio (Broad Front), Gabriel Boric's presidency and their close relation with Podemos in Spain. Second, our novel theory demands a methodological reflection to analyse processes of diffusion through the formation of circulation networks and the process of translation. In this vein, it is necessary to explore the potential of combining political discourse analysis, frame analysis and network ethnography or other methodological strategies to facilitate a comprehensive take on our focus.

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46. Experts and populism in the context of COVID-19

Liv Sunnercrantz

INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines a theoretical and methodological framework for the study of experts in socio-political contexts, focusing on the conjuncture of populism and COVID-19. By drawing on post-foundational theories on populism, it presents a coherent analytical framework for studying the role, function and constitution of ‘the expert’ in populist discourses. The chapter treats populism as a political and discursive logic that divides the social into two antagonistic camps consisting of a universal political subject like ‘the people’ on the one side and ‘the elite’ on the other, in a hierarchical dichotomy. This definition builds on Ernesto Laclau’s (2005) work, and subsequent developments by scholars like Chantal Mouffe (2018), Emilia Palonen (2021), Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis (2017). Central to this understanding is the construction of a frontier which differentiates ‘them’ from ‘us’ – while uniting and defining the latter (Palonen and Sunnercrantz 2021). ‘The people’ and ‘the elite’ are understood as empty categories that may be filled with and substituted for different identities, depending on the social, political, cultural, historical and local context. The ‘elite’ can be filled or substituted with identities, positions and signifiers like ‘experts’, ‘untrustworthy politicians’, ‘the establishment’ or ‘bureaucrats’ (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; Laclau 2005; Palonen and Sunnercrantz 2021). Thus, it is possible, yet not necessary, that the anti-elitism associated with populism may be substituted for, or filled with, anti-expertise.

It is debatable whether the opposition between a ‘people’ and ‘the expert’ is an intrinsic component of populism, as the uses of ‘experts’ vary between populist projects (see e.g. Bellolio 2022; Sunnercrantz and Yildirim 2022). While populism is said to valorize ‘common sense’, ‘folk wisdom’ and the knowledge of the ‘common man’ over that of experts and intellectuals (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017), so do other contemporary and historical discourses (Hofstadter 1963). Media has often ‘ditched the (academic) expert for “the man in the street”’ (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 108) and traditional politicians often allude to the lived experience of ‘common people’ (Atkins and Finlayson 2013). A populist discourse that refutes expert knowledge and champions ‘common sense’ may mobilize the ‘expertise of the people’ against the expertise of the bureaucratic state (Turner 2015) or pit a glorified ‘people’ against technocrats (Moffitt 2016). As populist projects challenge the political status quo (Palonen and Sunnercrantz 2021), they may antagonize experts as elites attached to the incumbent regime, as part of broader anti-establishment sentiment. They may also strive to replace mainstream experts with ‘alternative’ experts who contest established truths (Ylä-Anttila 2018). Thus, the roles of experts in populist politics are contextually contingent, relational and performative.

By conceptualizing ‘the expert’ as a figure without a pre-given substance or corresponding actor, this chapter shows how the expert is co-constituted in – rather than preceding – populist projects. If we anchor our definition of experts in the studied discourse, we can

identify the features that constitute an expert in that particular setting. In demonstrating how a performative-relational framework can be used to explore populism and experts, the chapter emphasizes the socio-historical contextuality of both. Empirical examples of ‘the expert’ entangled in populist discourses in the context of COVID-19 are presented and discussed. Initially, however, a review of existing conceptualizations of ‘the expert’ is necessary, before exploring how ‘the expert’ appears as a performed function, position or signifier in specific political discourses.

CONCEPTUALIZING ‘THE EXPERT’

To understand how ‘the expert’ is treated in populist discourses, we first need to understand what constitutes an ‘expert’. ‘The expert’ is rarely theorized directly, but features in studies of bureaucracy, professions and science. Nevertheless, the literature on experts agrees on several points. First, ‘the expert’ functions as a perceived neutral mediator between the realm of knowledge production and the realm of its application. Second, experts are referred to and consulted by politicians. And third, experts are associated with bureaucratic systems, technocracy and depoliticization. Many scholars today take the definition and constitution of experts for granted and describe the same ideal type of a technocratic or bureaucratic figure, endowed with certain institutionalized powers and authority (Evetts et al. 2006; Mieg and Evetts 2018).

Early research on experts paralleled an increase in the significance of science and social engineering in state governance from the 1910–1920s onwards (Mannheim 1954 [1929]; Polanyi 1962 [1958]; Weber 1972 [1922]). The functional importance of expertise was amplified by the specialization and fragmentation of the state apparatus. This includes rationalization of governmental and economic functions, along with increased bureaucracy, meritocracy and public administration in democratic systems. Experts were initially treated as a ‘new type of intellectual: the technical organizer, the specialist in applied science’ (Gramsci 1972 [1957]: 43). An ‘expert’ was attached to the bureaucratic power of modern democracies (see e.g. Gramsci 1972 [1957]; Mannheim 1954 [1929]; Weber 1972 [1922]) and signified through terms like ‘planners’, ‘functionaries’ or ‘specialists’.

Max Weber (1972 [1922]) and Karl Mannheim (1954 [1929]) juxtaposed ‘experts’ with politicians. Influenced by Mannheim, political scientist Giovanni Sartori (1987: 427) saw a necessary balance between democratic *input* (the weight of the *vox populi*) and *output* (‘how much the people benefit’) – connecting politicians to input and experts to output. He contrasted two extremes of idealized rule: the *technocratic rule* of ‘the expert’ and a *popular rule* of democracy, arguing that ‘if democracy is to survive, it will have to steer clear of either’ (Sartori 1987: 431). Accordingly, any theory arguing that ‘men and women ought to actively govern’, or limiting politics to work through ‘*generic reasonableness* – that is, on the basis of common sense’ – is set against the type of societal (and fiscal, technical, etc.) planning that requires ‘the non-expert be subordinated to the expert’ (Sartori 1987: 432–433). This leads to today’s apparent opposition between popular and expert power. Stephen P. Turner (2015) thinks that ‘we are faced with the dilemma of capitulation to “rule by experts” or democratic rule which is “populist” – that valorizes the wisdom of the people even when “the people” are ignorant and operate on the basis of fear and rumor’ (Turner 2015: 17).

A major challenge in researching ‘the expert’ is the matter of method and operationalization. ‘The expert’ has traditionally been operationalized as a professional position in

knowledge-based activities and occupations (Johnson 1972; Stehr and Grundmann 2011) and identified through a set of absolute, substantive traits and characteristics (Chi 2006) or practices that have gained a certain social and cultural authority (Evetts et al. 2006; Mieg and Evetts 2018). Alternatively envisioned as an ideal-typical subject position (Sunnercrantz 2017), the figure of ‘the expert’ connotes and exerts authority in interpreting, simplifying and mediating knowledge and ideology – providing a language for speaking about a topic (see also Laclau 1990). One way to approach ‘the expert’ empirically is therefore to analyse rhetorical practices in, for example, a policy debate, to distinguish performances of ‘the expert’ function: mediating knowledge, being called in to set priorities for action, advising policymakers, defining or explaining situations to a political audience or broader public and instilling legitimacy in speaking about a particular issue – relative to other types of ethos and claims to authority (Sunnercrantz 2017; Sunnercrantz and Yildirim 2022). Similarly, interpretative research has analysed whether a particular type of expertise or expert community succeeds in framing policy problems and relevant knowledge in policy disputes (see e.g. Daviter 2018).

Still, a problem of personification arises when ‘the expert’ is treated as a trained professional individual, inhabiting a semi-autonomous intellectual realm, who occasionally visits the public realm and politics (Sunnercrantz 2017). Even today, ‘the most widespread error of method’ is the tendency to look for the constitution of ‘the expert’ in the intrinsic nature of expert activities, ‘rather than in the ensemble of the system of relations in which these activities (and therefore the intellectual groups who personify them) have their place within the general complex of social relations’ (Gramsci 1972 [1957]: 120). From a post-foundational perspective, ‘the expert’ must be reconceptualized so as not to collapse the role of ‘the expert’ onto individual subjects. This leaves us with two ways to operationalize ‘the expert’: either as a performance or function of knowledge mediation or as a contextually constructed figure or symbol, that is, a signifier or subject position in specific discourses. Whether treated as a figure, function or role, ‘the expert’ is constructed, performed and positioned relationally. We must therefore explore the relations between ‘the expert’ and the context which defines them. In doing so, we may distinguish the constitution, function, role or positions of experts empirically. In an effort to outline an approach sensitive to both the relational constitution of ‘the expert’ and its political role/function, the chapter reinterprets theories on ‘the expert’ and combines interpretative approaches that reject the ‘anthropomorphic’ view of knowledge (see e.g. Fischer 2009; Putnam 1977; Radaelli 1999) with post-foundational and Gramscian thought.

POLITICAL ENTANGLEMENTS AND FUNCTIONS

The ideal type of ‘the expert’, outlined above, has been situated among top decision makers and power elites (Mills 1956) and problematized as a threat to democracy and political representation, triggering substantial socio-political debate (Bourdieu 2000; Foucault 1980; Gramsci 1972 [1957]; Mannheim 1954 [1929]; Moran 2011). While experts’ inclusion in public policymaking undoubtedly interweaves much-needed knowledge with politics, technocracy seems located on the other side of the coin (Fischer 2009; Radaelli 1999; Sartori 1987). Debates regarding the trade-off between freedom and safeguarding public health-care systems through emergency measures like lockdowns, vaccinations and the use of masks have raged in public media as well as in academic circles. The COVID-19 pandemic and its social,

political and fiscal implications have undoubtedly increased the visibility of ‘the expert’. Epidemiologists and virologists were called in as advisors to decision makers across the world and appeared daily in mass media, making ‘the expert’ a disputed subject in/of political debate. After the pandemic, ‘experts’ and politicians are likely to be blamed for mortality rates, restricted individual liberties and financial troubles alike. The controversies thus rendered visible, however, are not new.

‘The expert’ has long since been associated with a tendency to turn ‘all problems of politics into problems of administration’ (Mannheim 1954 [1929]: 105). This may undermine established policy structures and limit public and political participation as well as deliberation and contestation, as Falk Daviter (2018) argues. The use of non-elected ‘experts’ in policy formation is also discussed in terms of democratic deficits (Stone 2000; Svallfors 2020). Democratic processes may be side-stepped when ‘experts’ are allowed relatively autonomous power and authority over society and policymaking – without being democratically elected or accountable (Daviter 2018; Turner 2015). As states assign ‘expert opinion’ a privileged status and delegate policymaking responsibilities to ‘experts’, public policy may be insulated from macro-political scrutiny and public insights (Radaelli 1999).

The utilization of ‘experts’ as political advisors rests on a belief in expertise as objective and impartial, associated furthermore with a belief that laws are natural and neutral, rather than mere representations of socially constructed interests and worldviews (Mannheim 1954 [1929]; see also Putnam 1977). Now, rational or scientific analyses do not automatically bring about unanimous, neutral consensus on policy solutions (Mannheim 1954 [1929]; Radaelli 1999). Mannheim warned against ‘functionaries’ treating collective energies and protests as momentary disturbances to a perceived natural order (Mannheim 1954 [1929]). Radaelli (1999), like Putnam (1977), suggests that the use of expertise and technocracy in governance denies the political dimension when based on a belief in the existence of a ‘best way’ of regulating through competent professionals. While technocracy is often mentioned as either an antithesis to populism or a particular form of populism (Bickerton and Accetti 2021), I argue that technocracy is better understood as (attempts at) *political hegemonization*. Hegemonic practices attempt to stabilize the social order, assert consensus and cover up political contingencies. ‘The expert’ can play an important part in such processes. Radaelli (1999) contrasts the post-adversarial politics of expertise (as a mode of policymaking) with the logic of politicization (political conflict, ideological debate and controversies) (see also Putnam 1977). The debate surrounding the ills and benefits of populism has highlighted the post-democratic and post-political condition associated with the past decade’s neoliberal hegemony as a factor behind the recent surge in populism (Mouffe 2018).

From a performative perspective, we can recognize ‘the expert’ as a discursive, contextual practice or performance, rather than an individual possessing a certain experience or skill (Evetts et al. 2006; Fischer 2000). While it can be argued that everyone possesses expertise, not everyone fills the function of an expert in society (Gramsci 1972 [1957]). Certain aspects of traditional theory resonate with post-foundational perspectives. Mannheim (1954 [1929]) consistently argues that ‘the expert’ is more of a function than a person – and one of decontestation at that. The function of ‘the expert’ includes rule-conforming, routinization processes and attempts to bring the political under administrative control, to reduce irrational elements from the social order. To Mannheim (1954 [1929]), ‘the expert’ effectively obfuscates the conflicting and irrational forces behind rationalized orders. In post-foundational perspectives, ideology functions in a similar manner, to cover up contingencies in a process of decontes-

tation. The mediation of ideology belongs, in turn, to the function of the intellectual (Laclau 1990). Hence, following Laclau's reading of Antonio Gramsci, the intellectual function 'consists in the invention of languages' (Laclau 1990: 196) and the production of ideology covering up socio-political contingencies. While Laclau (1990) does not speak of 'experts' exactly, he speaks of an intellectual function, and what is the expert if not a specific type of intellectual (Gramsci 1972 [1957])? Assuming that the performance of this function belongs to 'the expert', we avoid collapsing it onto individual actors.

'The expert's' intellectual mandate and authority to diagnose perceived problems and recommend solutions are attached to a specific field or domain (Sunnercrantz 2017). This means that experts may also impose their understanding on the rest of society and set the terms of thinking about a problem (Dingwall and Lewis 1983; Hughes 1958). The reach of expert claims is dependent on the status or applicability of their domain. As Everett C. Hughes (1958) explains, the expertise of the priesthood in strongly Catholic countries includes the right to control the thoughts and beliefs of whole populations – while the expertise of an electrician may go no further than their immediate surrounding. Hence, 'the expert' has the power to shape perceptions. For example, the World Health Organization's (WHO) official declarations labelling the COVID-19 outbreak a global health emergency and (later) a global pandemic in early 2020 caused rippling effects and immediate action from governments across the globe (BBC News 2020).

Early scientific suggestions that, for example, anti-malarial drugs *might* aid in flattening the curve were reiterated in influential media outlets (see e.g. Hinthorn and Colyer 2020) and political discourses. While it would be tempting to say that United States President Donald Trump waged a 'war on expertise' (Rutledge 2020), it seems that his dismissal of 'experts' and 'expertise' targeted public health agencies and the supranational WHO – both potentially threatening the president's sovereignty. Initially, Trump supported the WHO and publicly thanked national 'expert' agencies (Rutledge 2020). He did not mobilize 'the people' against 'experts' per se, even if downplaying the threat of COVID-19, or if touting bleach as a miracle cure seems to contradict expert opinion (and common sense). When 'experts' contested Trump's speculation about injecting disinfectants, his administration retracted his statements and urged 'Americans' to consult their physicians (Higgins 2020). However, the Trump administration seems to have paid heed to financial expertise, as inferred from their emphasis on quick economic recovery (Rutledge 2020). So did Jair Bolsonaro, who prioritized economic interests and expertise and pitted the economy against public health. He replaced dissident ministers (including two health ministers) but insisted that he employed 'experts' to replace 'corrupt' ministers. Like Trump, Bolsonaro downplayed the severity of the virus, promoted alternative cures and oscillated in his endorsement of vaccination (Fonseca et al. 2021; Lasco 2020). Like many journalists and political leaders, Trump's and Bolsonaro's 'sciencey-sounding' (Goldacre 2009) rhetoric in discussing immunization, antibodies and social containment measures gave their statements a 'patina of scientific respectability' (Fonseca et al. 2021: 11). Still, while Bolsonaro opposed certain scientific and political establishments and consensuses, he did not divide the social into 'the people' versus 'the experts', although he did antagonize liberal intellectuals, the medical establishment and their influence on policy (Fonseca et al. 2021; Lasco 2020).

During the pandemic, many parties labelled as populist, when in positions of power, supported scientific elites and experts. In Hungary, the government attempted to depoliticize the COVID-19 situation, arguing that 'effective crisis management requires national unity and

to set aside any political rivalry' (Bene and Boda 2021: 98). Similar messages of 'national unity' were repeated in nationalist party discourses across the globe (Brunette and Fogel 2022; Sunnercrantz 2020; Zanotti and Meléndez 2022), stressing politicians' dependency on 'the opinions of scientists and experts' (Bene and Boda 2021: 98). In the Hungarian case, criticism of crisis management, albeit from recognized expert positions/institutions, was dismissed as political and partisan. Prime minister Victor Orbán publicly embraced expert advice and asserted that he was 'no expert' – despite relinquishing neither control nor media attention to 'the expert'. Orbán 'drew a definite line between the expert and political knowledge', arguing against direct expert influence on political measures, as the latter had to be 'based on the "common sense"' that he possessed (Bene and Boda 2021: 98). 'Expert opinion', accordingly, serves only as a 'factual background' for "'common sense"-based political decisions' (Bene and Boda 2021: 98). Here, 'the expert' does not constitute an 'other' or inimical position. It is merely subordinated to the (will of) 'the people'. While Orbán's exploitation of 'the expert' and disqualification of critics might serve to further strengthen his position in Hungarian politics, political leaders in more contested positions (e.g. Trump, Bolsonaro) sought to challenge institutionalized expertise to a higher degree.

Katharina Rietig's (2014) analysis reveals that government representatives, at best, perceive expert advice as a neutral input to elucidate technical issues. At worst, it is used to support political objectives and sidestep deliberative processes, as illustrated by the sudden lockdowns enforced during the pandemic. Other scholars have accused 'experts' of perpetuating social injustices, of developing solutions attainable only to elites, of serving private interests and of using their authority to protect power elites and systems against political challenges (Fischer 2000; Foucault 1980; Mills 1956). Turner (2015) exposes expert knowledge as mere claims and ideology masquerading as neutral uncontested facts. Analogously, scientific advances may be reframed as issues of public concern, involving, for instance, environmental or financial risk. In such cases, scientific assessments may be dismissed if they don't support the problem perceptions and policy initiatives of the incumbent regime (Daviter 2018), as seen in the Hungarian case. Remembering and coalescing previous theory, we might reimagine 'the expert' as performing a particular function of interpretation and mediation, for example, 'between the available analytic frameworks of social science, particular policy findings, and the differing perspectives of public actors, both those of policy decision-makers and citizens' (Fischer 2009: 11).

SYSTEMIC AND RELATIONAL VIEWS

The position and legitimacy of 'the expert' is often linked to institutionalized systems that produce and validate knowledge, like academia and the sciences. Such systems decide what is to be regarded as true and scientific and assure that expert knowledge is recognized as superior to the knowledge and experiences of 'the common man' (Daston and Galison 2007). Michel Foucault (1980) also saw 'the expert' (or 'specific' intellectual) as a function of establishing guidelines for the production and veridiction of truth. As 'the strategist of life and death', the expert 'has at his disposal, whether in the service of the State or against it, powers which can either benefit or irrevocably destroy life' (Foucault 1980: 130). Through this capacity the expert has gained significance in the pandemic. For example, the Swedish government initially delegated pandemic management to the state epidemiologist and the Public Health

Agency (PHA). The PHA and the state epidemiologist served as potential scapegoats for unpopular or unsuccessful decisions. Cabinet ministers and oppositional populists alike played a more subtle role compared to other countries (e.g. Hungary) where politicians utilized the opportunity to reinforce their position through statesmanship. While Sweden's institutional arrangement allows for expertise to influence policy and administrative action, expertise is to a lesser extent found in government departments. The PHA was given sufficient mandate, but without the crucial means and information to coordinate the decentralized health-care system. Sweden's emphasis on voluntary measures stands out internationally, and both political and medical communities were deeply divided on its effectiveness. Dissident professors and physicians publicly questioned the containment strategy as COVID-19-related deaths increased dramatically, especially in nursing homes. But the state epidemiologist prevailed and retained governmental and public support (Pierre 2020; Sunnercrantz 2020).

The peculiar relationship between experts and politicians observed in the Swedish pandemic response needs to be seen in a broader context. Many political projects in the twentieth century aimed to reconstruct power hierarchies, moving from nepotism to credentialism. Since then, power hierarchies have become largely characterized by formal expertise (Daston and Galison 2007; Evetts et al. 2006). But institutionalized expert systems are not void of political conflict or control. Various mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion regulate access to expert systems and disciplines. The privileges of expert positions are safeguarded through professionalization, internal systems of validation, institutionalization and cooperation with funding agents and authorities (Larson 1977; Murphy 1988; Sunnercrantz and Yildirim 2022). Consequently, expert systems may be perceived as exclusionary and elitist. Post-industrial developments coupled with expanding education systems, increased professionalization of the labour force and technological advancements have made expert knowledge broadly available. Today, 'digital hyperconnectivity' means that 'expert opinions, expert models and projections, expert research, and expertise-relevant data are more accessible and more abundant than ever' (Brubaker 2021: 76). While often believed to democratize knowledge production, this has also enabled public challenges to the elitism and autocracy of expert authority (Fischer 2000; Webster 2014 [1995]). During the pandemic, this was exemplified by protests against, for example, social distancing measures. Rogers Brubaker (2021: 75) argues that this 'hyper-accessibility of expertise' enables laypersons to challenge professional expertise based on expertise-relevant data – not just on the basis of 'common sense', everyday experience or lay expertise, which has often been thought of as the ground of populist critique. Scepticism towards 'experts' now seems apparent and increasing. But will the death of 'the ideal of expertise' (Nichols 2017: 3) really follow the proliferation of online search engines, public encyclopaedias and social media platforms?

It seems that (established) 'experts' and 'elites' are constituted through differentiation from the popular. A relational approach allows us to identify the expert by 'the general social relations which specifically characterize the position' of the expert in society (Gramsci 1972 [1957]: 121). Shared imaginaries provide audiences with schematic and stereotypical representations of figures such as the 'expert'. They can evoke expectations or connotations, and even lend credence to and legitimize the speaker's representativity and entitlement to speak about a certain issue (Sunnercrantz 2017). Mere references to 'experts', as subject positions or signifiers, may lend legitimacy to political projects. This claim to legitimacy is clear in Caterina Froio's (2022) analysis of the National Rally's (Rassemblement National, RN) framing of politics during the pandemic in France. The RN sided with marginalized scientists

and opposed those in the advisory National Scientific Council appointed by the government. By contraposing the latter's 'elite interpretations' to 'those of the people' (i.e. 'scientists who disagreed with the policies proposed in Paris'), the RN assumed an anti-establishment position relying on alternative experts (Froio 2022: 16). Utilizing public disagreements between medialized 'experts', they publicly referred to the dissenting scientists' knowledge, scientific evidence, polls and epidemiologic data (Froio 2022: 13). This illustrates the emptiness of 'experts': what makes the individual actor belong to 'the elite'/other – or makes them a source of legitimacy – simply depends on whether their statements concur with a certain worldview. In this way, the RN could present itself as a credible "professional" and "competent" party, able to address (complex) issues' (Froio 2022: 16). On the French left, Unbowed France (La France Insoumise, LFI) also mobilized a 'people' versus 'elite' dichotomy. LFI criticized the 'omniscience of experts' (Chazel 2020) but sought primarily to capitalize on the economic crisis rather than blame scientific 'elites' (Baloge and Hubé 2021).

A related tendency is so-called epistemological populism, where the expertise or 'folk wisdom' of 'common people' is favoured over established experts (Saurette and Gunster 2011). Tuukka Ylä-Anttila (2018) affirms that this eschews formal expertise and proposes a more nuanced analysis using the concept *counterknowledge* to pinpoint the contestations of epistemic authority. The analysis shows how conspiracy theorists mobilize alternative knowledge systems and authorities to challenge and replace established elites. This involves the creation and mobilization of counterknowledge, counterexpertise and countermedia. Political activists may see themselves as true experts in contrast to the established – but allegedly false – experts (Ylä-Anttila 2018). Even within scientific institutions, researchers focused on marginalized issues may be largely unrecognized or met with ridicule or resistance – until 'their' issues gain broader recognition (e.g. environmental issues). Expert elites who reiterate the status quo may be reluctant to recognize marginalized or unorthodox issues, but if such issues gain momentum and spread to the public, mainstream media or social movements, these alternative experts can supply demanded expertise. Thus, ill-reputed experts may grow respectable – and reputable experts may fall from grace. If successful, the counterelite may replace the established elite and its indisputable facts and solutions (Evetts et al. 2006; Mieg and Evetts 2018). While we saw a temporary and collective loss of faith in the economic expert following the 2008 financial crisis (Moran 2011), free-market ideology and its experts were never really dethroned from their position of power.

Attention to this relational and contextual constitution is crucial if we are to distinguish experts from other elements in a discourse. Actors may be positioned in various subject positions at different moments or simultaneously – able to step in and out of 'the expert' position. An actor may be recognized as an 'expert' in one discourse but labelled 'false' in another, as:

adherents of one persuasion may refuse to recognize any intellectual merit in those of a rival persuasion, calling them cranks, frauds or fools. People will differ accordingly also in their use of such professional descriptions as 'composer', 'poet', 'painter', 'priest' and in that of accreditive terms like 'expert', 'reputable' or 'distinguished' applied to persons claiming to be composers, poets, etc. (Polanyi 1962 [1958]: 235)

Replacing Polanyi's composers and poets with scientists, doctors and nurses, we can argue that during the pandemic accreditive terms were discursively applied and attached to subject positions. Polanyi argues that the allocation of intellectual merit involves 'a measure of consensus' (Polanyi 1962 [1958]: 235). By extension, we might say that intellectual merit and

expertise is discursively constituted and dependent on some sort of discursive resonance or recognition. We also expect ‘an expert’ to act differently from a political leader or a journalist. Yet, in populist discourse, ‘the expert’ does not necessarily equate to either the formal merits recognized by expert systems or the position of authority, legitimacy and public trust it connotes in other discourses.

The expert can thus be recognized and treated as a relational subject position taken up by or assigned to a subject/actor. In speaking and acting, we position ourselves in relation to discursively available subject positions and meaningful elements. Therefore, ‘the expert’ can be detectable in a speaker’s (explicit or implicit) enunciated position; their name, signature, (self-)assigned subject position or attachment to an institution or status is co-constituted in the processes of articulation. A person can momentarily attach themselves, or others, to available subject positions, including ‘expert’, ‘politician’ or ‘man of the people’. These positionings are not always recognized as legitimate by peers or even performed by the (alleged) experts themselves (Sunnercrantz 2017; Sunnercrantz and Yildirim 2022). Moreover, these positions are treated as opposites in many discourses. As seen in the Hungarian case, Orbán takes up the position of a politician while (or by) declaring himself to be ‘no expert’ on pandemic matters. Orbán thus distinguishes his position from the expert, at least in these matters. We might otherwise have associated Orbán with a type of politician speaking in the name of the people and experiential expertise – which we generally recognize as ‘populist’.

CONCLUSION

Treating ‘the expert’ as a relationally performed subject position allows us to reappraise the entanglements of experts and expertise in populist discourses during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, the signifier ‘expert’ has been linked either to ‘elites’ and established expert systems or to ‘the people’. In the latter case, experts seemingly grow organically out of countermovements while keeping in close contact with ‘the popular masses’ in ways reminiscent of Gramsci’s (1972 [1957]) concept of organic intellectuals. In the former case, by contrast, populist logics couple ‘experts’ with ‘the establishment’, ‘the elite’ or hegemonic regimes and their institutions. While antagonistic sentiments against ‘the expert’ may in these instances aid in mobilizing a people, it rarely seems to be the sole unifying factor. Moreover, populist discourses are not consistently opposed to expertise or ‘the expert’ per se, as seen when organic experts are mobilized as a counterweight to the experts of the incumbent regime. Like many other social movements, some populist mobilizations combine their critique of traditional ‘experts’ with an appeal to organic counterexperts who function (un)wittingly as a counterelite that guides the convictions of, and lends legitimacy to, the populist project. In the struggle for dominance, any political movement would do well to assimilate experts entangled in the bureaucratic-democratic order and the production of truth. By fostering its own experts, a populist project may more effectively achieve dominance by simply replacing established ‘experts’ with its own. Once in power, a political party may then again utilize the legitimacy of ‘the expert’ in governance to assert an allegedly politically ‘neutral’ order and cover up contingencies. Such technocratic manoeuvres should not be mistaken for populist practices or be labelled under oxymorons like ‘technopopulism’. On the contrary, technocracy may be the means for a populist-turned-established party in the process of becoming hegemonic.

To sum up, populism is often said to valorize ‘common sense’ and ‘folk wisdom’, but this does not necessarily imply an opposition to ‘experts’ or ‘expertise’. Rather, it seems that mainstream academics mistakenly assume that ‘the people’ cannot be equated to ‘the expert’. Relatedly, rhetoric that pits ‘the people’ against ‘the expert’ has been propagated for decades, not least by scholars. By linking expertise to science and separating it from the uneducated ‘people’, many scholars construct and reaffirm ‘the gap’ between experiential and scientific expertise (see e.g. Brubaker 2021; Saurette and Gunster 2011). Researchers who equate anti-elitism or anti-establishment sentiment with anti-expertise might even be perceived as elitist, or anti-populist. All in all, it might be a mistake to actively contribute to such a self-fulfilling prophecy and further exclude the popular masses from ‘our’ exclusive expert systems.

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