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Populism

The concept and the polemic

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Populism has been a term of abuse in the English language since it was first coined in the late nineteenth century. But as soon as it entered the political vocabulary of the day, "populism" and "populists" are swiftly appropriated by those discontent with the socioeconomic conditions of the age. In 1892, the Omaha Platform inaugurates the People's Party of America (or, Populist Party). Four years later, one of the contenders of the 1896 United States Presidential election, Democrat William Jennings Bryan, runs for office with a ticket with a Populist in-print. Over a century later, populism is still very much a term of abuse. Today's "populist revolt," punctuated by figures and movements such as US President Donald J. Trump, Brexit, President Jair Bolsonaro from Brazil, Spain's Podemos party or Greece's SYRIZA, is a wave of discontent whose figureheads are as much vilified as they are capable of attracting a following of die-hard enthusiasts.

In the meantime, populism has helped shape twentieth-century politics and entered the lexicon of the social sciences. As polemic and as concept, populism is one of the most central political ideas of the age. It is likely to remain so for as long as political regimes will seek legitimacy from the figure of the sovereign people.

What is populism?

But, after all, what is populism? Why is it centrally oriented towards the figure of the sovereign people? What are its causes and consequences?

To properly answer these questions, one needs to start with the accumulated historical experience of populist politics and populist scholarship since the late nineteenth century. One common thread is discernible within and across all three main populist waves: the American Populists of the late nineteenth century, the mid-twentieth century Latin American populisms and today's populisms. This transnational thread is not something substantive, such as a particular kind of ideology, a certain discourse or a specific type of mobilization. Instead, this common thread is simultaneously more specific and more abstract than any substantive content: it is a particular way of doing politics. This way of doing politics, or "logic," is shared by all cases of populist politics despite the *polemical* character of the concept of "populism."[1] Often used by conservatives and liberals to deride legitimate popular claims and grievances, it is also used by democrats who are wary of demagogues. In fact, however, the particular populist way of doing

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politics is very similar to democratic politics insofar both are undertaken in the name of "the people." In rigor, democracy precedes populism, as populism originates in democracy's paradox. This means that both share the same normative orientation towards equality and equal respect. But this also means that populists differ from democrats in important respects. Populists use the betrayal of these norms in the form of a sense of undeserved inferiority by a part of the people. They do this in order to promote the division of the people in two rivalrous parts where one part is blamed for the suffering of the other part. Finally, populists typically make a redemptive appeal at the restoration of the original democratic promise of equality and inclusion.[2]

This sheds light on existing accounts of populism. These include a combination of one or more of the following aspects or dimensions. First, populism is a political phenomenon. Most agree it is also a socio-cultural phenomenon in the sense of involving society and social values. But what *kind* of phenomenon populism is remains unclear and object of heated discussion.

Second, the notion of "the people" is central in most accounts. This is hardly surprising. The very term "populist" or "populism" derives etymologically from *populus*, the Latin word for "people." Moreover, historical experience shows the concept of "the people" to play a central role in every instantiation of populism. Yet there are almost as many understandings of how "the people" relates to populism as there are of populism itself. Some advocate "the people" to be one of few "core concepts" of populism as a thin-centred ideology. Others see "the people" as a rhetorical element of populist discourse or persuasion. Others still see in the construction of "the people" the ultimate operation of political representation. This variety of understandings is as much a consequence of the polemical nature of the term as it mirrors deep-seated epistemological differences among populist scholars.

Third, there is the opposition between the few and the many. No approach to populism denies the significance of this dichotomy, with most emphasizing its highly moralized nature. Indeed, in populist politics, the many are glorified and the few vilified. But the exact nature of this opposition remains unclear. For some, the *versus* in the "us vs. them" dichotomy is fundamental. There is no possible identification between "us" and "them." As friend and foe, the many and the few hate each other and only wish the destruction of the other. For others, however, as part of one and the same people, the few and the many identify themselves within some broadly shared scheme of social cooperation. Again, both as a polemic and as a concept, the challenge is to shed light into the precise nature of this opposition.

Fourth, populist politics typically involves emotions. What these feelings are, and how we are to account for them, is the source of much debate. Fear is the emotion of choice among social psychologists and political scientists trying to understand what motivates populist vote today. Another emotion typically associated with populism is resentment. Postwar sociologists and political scientists saw in class resentment the key attitudinal trait of populist mobilization.[3] More recent approaches have suggested to study resentment not as a social attitude but as a way of organizing social and political action. In this sense, populism is best understood as a specific instantiation of the politics of emotions, i.e. of how emotions can help pattern collective action along distinctive pathways, pathways that unfold in a relatively independent way from the substantive mental states or feelings they originate from.[4]

Fifth, populism is a modern phenomenon. Although there are important studies of populism tracing it back to Antiquity[5] or the Renaissance,[6] the fact remains that the overwhelming majority of the populist scholarship focuses on the past 150 years. This is for good reason. It has partly to do with the fact, already noted by Reinhardt Koselleck, that all "isms" emerge in the course of the nineteenth century and populism, coined in the early 1890s in the United States, is no exception. But it also points to the fact that the modern age is peculiarly conducive to populist politics.

Although all, or at least some of, these elements are present in every available approach to populism, the precise way they are combined varies from approach to approach. This fact, in addition to the polemical nature of the concept alluded to above, rules out the possibility of finding a "common denominator" among existing approaches in order to reach a consensual solution. Instead, it forces us to make a step back and rethink the very epistemological foundations upon which said approaches operate. Once the epistemological assumptions of the existing models of populism are clarified, the rationale for each approach's particular combination of the constitutive elements of populism soon comes to the fore.

Main approaches

From this perspective, populist scholarship can be divided into two broad categories. On the one hand, there are those approaches who aim at interpreting or explaining the contents that define populism. These approaches can be designated as "ontic" approaches. They typically favour a naturalist epistemology. On the other hand, there are approaches that aim at analyzing the ways in which these contents are organized. This second category encompasses "ontological" or "logical" approaches. These tend to favour some variety of social constructionism.

Ontic approaches comprise the vast majority of the literature on populism. Since the early twentieth century, we have seen historians, sociologists and political scientists devising more or less sophisticated explanations for the emergence of populism, what makes it distinctive and of its consequences for the political system. There are two sub-types of ontic approaches. The first encompasses empirical-deductive approaches. These approaches are oriented towards explaining populism through the discovery of causal relations between structural determinants and its (populist) political consequences. Populism is here a substantive political phenomenon, namely a form of political mobilization of large hitherto excluded swaths of the population triggered by macro-level modernizing processes such as economic development, urbanization, and rapid value change. A good illustration is the functionalist approach developed by Gino Germani to explain the Argentinian case, arguably the most sophisticated sociological theory of populism of the mid-twentieth century.[7] The second sub-type is hermeneutical approaches, whose aim is to provide a thick description of populism through historically detailed case studies. Margaret Canovan's (1981) monumental comparative historical analysis in *Populism* provides a fine illustration of a hermeneutical approach.[8] In such cases, populism is believed to have a specific essence, a sort of historically specific combination of the aforementioned constitutive elements alongside with an unspecified number of others (charismatic leadership and a rural character, for instance).[9] Rich in detail, such ethnographic descriptions resist generalization, however.

The large majority of studies of populism by social or political scientists today are of one of these two sub-types. Populism is, according to this understanding, an entity with a distinctive, measurable and observable content or *ontic* reality. To cite a recent best-selling primer on the subject, which presents itself as intervening in the "long-standing debate over the *essence* of populism," the aim of such approaches is to distil "the *core* of all major past and present manifestations of populism."[10] What exactly this "core" or "essence" is, however, remains a matter of fierce dispute: should we take it for a strategy or mode of organization,[11] a project or repertoire of political mobilization,[12] an ideology,[13] a mode of persuasion,[14] a democratic ethos,[15] a discourse[16] or simply as a style of political communication?[17] As a result, the question of "whether populism is essentially left- or right-wing, fascist or egalitarian, forward-looking and progressive or backward-looking and nostalgic"[18] is repeatedly put and left unanswered. No clear delimitation of populism as a concept and a phenomenon is ever reached. The outcome is a theoretical stalemate with profound political implications. For even if populism could be defined as strategy

or as ideology or as discourse or as style, it cannot certainly be all of these at the same time. As populist movements with very different social bases, organizational strategies, and ideological orientations coexist, general confusion necessarily follows. Take populist vote. The literature is divided among those who assure us that who votes for populist parties is the "Interwar generation," in particular the "working class, the less educated, men, white Europeans, the economically insecure, and those expressing political mistrust,"[19] and those who are adamant that populist voters are "young, often well-educated, unemployed, and precarious workers."[20] With no clear definition in sight, "populism" soon became a catch-phrase for all things anti-democratic and illiberal if not outright racist, xenophobic and violent.

The second group of approaches takes its lead from this difficulty.[21] In this case, the assumption is that our knowledge of the social and political world cannot be easily disentangled from that world proper. By studying populism with social-scientific tools, we help construe the political phenomenon known as "populism" in a certain way. The upshot is that there is no populism as such without some sort of social construction, be it by laypersons or by experts. Populism *is* a cultural construction, not a natural reality independent of our dealings with it. From this perspective, what populism is, how its constitutive elements relate to each other and how these then relate to other concepts (e.g. democracy) becomes a matter of identifying the correct logic behind populist politics.

The forerunner of studying populism in this way was the British sociologist, Peter Worsley. It was Worsley who, at the end of the 1960s, first suggested populism to function as an "emphasis in political culture."[22] This was a radical departure from both the historical analyses that predominated well into the 1950s and the social-scientific studies of the 1960s in, at least, two different accounts. First, against a literature that either praised populism's democratic credentials or derided its anti-democratic impetus, Worsley assumed an unusual agnostic political position: the populist "emphasis" could either reinforce democratic participation or lead to authoritarian solutions. Second, Worsley extended this agnosticism to the way we should conceive of populism. There was no substantive feature that defined populism; the only "reality" to populism was that it functioned in a certain way.

Ernesto Laclau's ontological approach to populism is directly inspired in Worsley's pioneering work. This epistemological option for a logic-based approach to populism can also be found in other important populist scholars, including Canovan's later work[23] and even, to a certain extent, Cas Mudde's definition of populism as a thin-centred ideology[24] and its offspring, the so-called "ideational" approach.[25] Yet Laclau remains the only populist thinker to dispense with contents altogether and favour instead a purely ontological model of populist politics.

The main advantage of Laclau's option to dispense with contents altogether is an unprecedented degree of theoretical consistency and sophistication in the definition of populism. For the first time, populist research has at its disposal a philosophically dense and conceptually clear definition of the phenomenon at hand. As a result, empirical research has benefited significantly from Laclau's normative theory of populism. This has been particularly the case in Europe. The so-called "discourse analysis" of populism, which has proliferated since the late 2000s under the influence of Laclau's former associates and students at Essex, tends to conceive of "discourse" in more positivist and "ontic" terms than what is the case in the original works by poststructuralist thinkers.[26]

General assessment

Despite the real progress made in recent decades and the variety of approaches now available to study populism, the fact remains that this task still faces a number of formidable challenges.

First, there is the proverbial difficulty of defining populism. Despite the progress made in recent years, populism remains a slippery phenomenon. The fact that it has no substantive content rules out rigid definitions that try to encapsulate its "essence," "substance" or "distinctive character," including definitions that try to capture the "minimum common denominator" of populist politics. Ernesto Laclau's celebrated ontological definition of populism as animated by the logic of enmity is an important step in the right direction.[27] Yet, once even Laclau's sophisticated theorization of populism, certainly the most systematic and ambitious to date, does not resist closer scrutiny. This is because of, at least, three different reasons: it mobilizes an ontology (the logic of enmity) that seems inadequate to capture populism; it conflates populism with politics itself; and it tends to reduce reality to discourse. If we are truly to understand what populism is and how it works, we need a definition that is precise enough to distinguish it from other political phenomena (while clarifying how it relates to them) but flexible enough to capture the plurality of historical manifestations associated with populist politics.

Second, populism belongs to no country. Populism is a transnational political phenomenon. This is truer today than ever before. Unlike previous populist waves that were geographically limited to either one country or a region, the current populist wave has, for the very first time, acquired a truly global scale. SYRIZA, Brexit, Trump, Bolsonaro, Podemos, to name just a few, are but different reference points in the same global populist constellation, a constellation that has taken the political global scene by surprise in the early 2010s. Even though most democratic countries have had first-hand experiences with populism, the fact remains that these experiences can be noticeably different. Throughout the decades, populism has absorbed new elements every time it made landfall in a given polity. This means that each concrete historical manifestation of populism requires a careful historical analysis *and* a consideration of the relative position of that particular manifestation in the more general pattern of development of populism as a transnational phenomenon.

Third, populism exists only in relation with democracy. Without the normative orientation towards equality and equal respect and the resentment that its denial produces, there can be no populism. This has been the case ever since populism first erupted as a collective movement in the nineteenth century. Since then, both populism and democracy have changed remarkably. So has their symbiotic relationship. This makes any discussion of the relationship between populism and democracy more complex today than ever before. Yet this also makes it all the more relevant today. Any normative judgement of populism's democratic credentials depends not only on what we think characterizes populism but also on our understanding of representative democracy itself. Democratic regimes vary remarkably, and so do the theories we develop to evaluate them. This variety of options has only grown with time. Yet so has popular dissatisfaction with democracy, often translated into electoral disaffection and increased openness towards alternative political solutions. It is difficult not to notice the relation between this so-called "crisis of representative democracy" and the "populist revolt" of the early twenty-first century. This means that any enquiry into populism today is also an enquiry into democracy itself and its frontiers.

Fourth, populism originates in democracy's failed promise of equality and inclusion. The rising levels of socioeconomic inequality and political exclusion of recent decades make this concern with equality more relevant today than ever. Yet it also makes populism inherently unstable, difficult to predict and hard to tame. This is because while inequality and exclusion have always been a central element in populist proposals for constitutional reform, they have also inspired scapegoating and other forms of political demagoguery that do little to address their real causes and potential solutions. In all probability, this inherent feature of populist politics is likely to worsen in a digitally interconnected world where the acceleration of social change reached unprecedented levels with unpredictable consequences.

Conclusion: the power and fragility of populist politics

Time and again, populism has been swept up in the tumultuous spirit of the times and overwhelmed by anticipation for a goal that crystallized on the horizon. This spirit, however, proved to be precisely that: an apparition that lacked actuality and disintegrated the moment populists attempted to grasp it. The ground slips from beneath their feet and they are left suspended between the dream and the nightmare they brought about. To conclude, therefore, we will briefly dwell on whether populism has an untimely presence in the present. It goes without saying that political failure, and the disappointment that accompanies it, is commonplace. As we know, all too well, situations that, at one moment, appear fluid and radically open to new possibilities can quickly turn. Indeed, if there is a history to populism it can be summed up by this dialectic of hope and disappointment.

Normatively speaking, this means that resentment can no longer be used to discern possibility in the situation: if resentment is unable to describe the tension in the people's revolt between its democratic intentions and its anti-democratic results, it cannot be trusted to provide a reliable means of discerning the latent possibilities in the present. And, if some alternative democratic ideology offers a better explanation of the people's revolt, then surely it also offers a more productive means by which to ascertain the immanent potentialities contained within the world as it exists.

Once one scrutinizes the logic of resentment defining populism, it is easy to see why populism remains such an ambiguous phenomenon and its relationship to democracy so contested. Populism can have both a preventative and a restorative role within democracy. Democracy implies self-rule and some level of resentment against being ruled.

Preventatively, resentment towards the ruling elite, and the threat of conflict implied in it, might work against elites transforming their disproportionate power and influence into full-blown disregard for other groups' interests and the common good. Understood as indignation, populism bears a close relationship with the fundamental principles and values grounding democracy, in particular its egalitarian commitments. Restoratively, therefore, populism might point to their violation and address the community at large with a view to the restoration of broken promises and shared commitments. Hence, we see populism being often symptomatic of important democratic exclusions which are largely being overlooked or not dealt with. Populist outbursts work regularly the outward expression of frustration, exasperation, or anger at the lived experience of that exclusion.

Insofar and as long as resentment relates to a normative *fundus*, and that it mobilizes citizens around its breaching, it bears a potential of democratic awakening. Yet the potential need not be realized. Resentment is a notoriously fickle and slippery logic of action. At its extreme, it can either fixate obsessively on particular objects or become virtually objectless and all-encompassing. As a result, the understanding to what might be provoking loss or injury might be compromised. There is always a chance that populist denunciation awakens and engages the community in a discussion of what might best restore and protect the norms and principles that have been found to be compromised. But there is also a possibility it simply closes off that discussion. This closure can happen in two mutually reinforcing ways. First, the problem at hand – the causes of collective or systemic injustice faced, and even their reach – lend themselves to misdiagnosis when one fixates in one single "cause" or when every possible cause can be the cause. Second, a problem thus misdiagnosed lends itself to an immediately available solution or a redemptive all-encompassing one. Considerations of how or why the problem might have been misdiagnosed or how and why even agreed ideals might entail different modes of interpretation and implementation, and face opposition within democratic politics, can thereby be ruled out.

Populism is never merely about moral resentment. It is not mere frustration at the violation of a normative *fundus* or at systemic injustices stemming from it. It also establishes a conflictive relationship between rival groups, insofar as responsibility or even fault for such violations are imputed to certain actors and actions. This populist impulse towards moralization and victimization inevitably opens the door to risks. It tends to portray politics as a zero-sum game, where the other's gains are necessarily my losses. When indignation devolves into envy, social cooperation becomes difficult, and the residual normative reference in envy struggles to address the community at large, let alone the perceived offenders. Unlike indignation, envy is both painful and nonconstructive. How can the many cooperate with the few, or the part within the many address the other part within it, if they do not wish the few or the other part to have some good, *even if* they themselves do not want it; *even if* they prefer to deprive others of the good to acquiring it for themselves; *even if* the few or the other part do not harm them? An exclusive focus on envy, comparison of fortunes, and allegedly intentional culpable agents and actions, can sacrifice progressive politics at the hands of passivizing victimization. It can easily distract from, or even preclude engagement with, the collective and systemic inequalities and injustices that might lie behind one's felt injuries and the politics that shapes them. As Michael Ure rightly explains, "it is because socio-political resentment," identifying and addressing collective and systematic injustices, "responds to the political regulation of basic ontological risks and contingencies – misfortune, irreversibility, loss and so on – that it runs the risk of sliding into ontological *ressentiment*," a form of radical envy or envious hatred, "and with it indiscriminate, unremitting blaming, envious spoiling of the good and dangerous attempts to make politics the locus of metaphysical redemption."[28] This radical envy is particularly dangerous because it can become obsessed with the tinniest of marginal gains, and thereby undermine possibilities of trust and cooperation further. In turn, radical envy can initiate "a diabolic cycle in which envy refocuses itself on increasingly minor advantages, and it is tempting to think that the remedy for every failure is a search for yet further dimensions of human life that have not been 'equalized'."[29] At that point any vision of progressive politics can turn into a dystopian vision of egalitarian perfectionism or monism.

The current populist wave poses challenges to democracies, pushing for change under the threat of unrest and civil strife. Demagoguery is a danger, but so is complacency with interest groups, oligarchies and inequality. In face of this, the time is ripe for a re-examination of how democratic populism is. It is important to open up a space to consider the potentially positive role populism may have in democratic political life. Conceived as an outgrowth of democracy, populism has accompanied it through the ages functioning as both a necessary corrective to its unfulfilled promises and a dangerous demagogic dynamic that can open the door to tyranny or domination. But as liberal supremacy is gradually entrenched within the amalgam "liberal democracy," the added value of populism's democratic potential rises proportionally. In moments of crisis like the present, this is particularly significant as populism can unleash repressed democratic resources that can correct irresponsive and opaque representative systems of government. Yet, by the same token, the potential for nondemocratic solutions around a demagogic leader or elite also increases exponentially: the crisis of representative democracy is also the crisis of liberal ideas of limited government, checks and balances, tolerance and pluralism, all pivotal in helping to prevent tyranny.

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Notes

1. As a result, few call themselves "populist" for fear of being associated with the different pejorative connotations of the term, ranging from irrationalism to xenophobia and conspiracy mindedness. For a genealogy of this polemic, see Laclau (2005: 1–64). See also Houwen (2011) and Stavrakakis (2017).
2. On this four-step process, also known as the logic of democratic resentment, see Silva and Brito Vieira (2019).
3. For example, Lipset (1955) and Parsons (1963 [1955]). On class-based resentment generated in the frustrated "sacrificial contract" among American working-class men in the 1960s, see Sennett and Cobb (1972, 134–135). On class resentment more generally, see Barbalet (1992; 1998).
4. For example, Nussbaum (2013).
5. For example, Vatter (2012).
6. For example, McCormick (2011).
7. Germani (1965).
8. Canovan (1981).
9. Canovan's typological approach has exerted a significant influence in the populist literature. See, e.g. Taguieff (1995: 24–35).
10. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017: 5 – our emphases).
11. Weyland (2001: 14); Betz (2002: 198).
12. Jansen (2011: 82); Brubaker (2017: 4–6).
13. Canovan (2002; 2004); Mudde (2004; 2007); Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017); Hawkins, Carlin, Littvay, and Kaltwasser (2019).
14. Kazin (2017).
15. Goodwyn (1976).
16. On discourse generally, see Torfing (1995). On populism as discourse, see e.g. Howarth and Stavrakakis (2000); Pauwels (2011).
17. For example, Moffitt and Tormey (2014).
18. Minogue (1969: 200).
19. Norris and Inglehart (2019: 274).
20. Della Porta, Fernández, Kouki, and Mosca (2017: 53).
21. For example, Laclau (2005: 15).
22. Worsley (1969).
23. Margaret Canovan moves away from hermeneutics and the study of "ideology and policy content of populist movements" in order to "concentrate instead on structural considerations." These "structural considerations" refer to three fundamental characteristics she believes all populist politics possess: anti-elitism, a reference to "the people," and a simple and direct style (see Canovan 1999: 3).
24. Despite his ontic definition of populism as a coherent "ideology," however "thin," Cas Mudde moves in a structural direction when he treats populism as a particular view about how society is and ought to be structured. He goes on to speak of populism as simply setting up a framework – the antagonism between people and elites against the backdrop of popular sovereignty – with no specific contents. Mudde's recognition of populism's fundamental indeterminacy goes together with his distancing from "thicker" ontic approaches, defining populism as demagoguery, charismatic leadership, or simplistic political discourse (see, e.g. Mudde 2004).
25. Mudde's work is the starting point of the so-called "ideational" approach, according to which populism is a thin-centred ideology, frame, discourse or worldview comprising three "core concepts:" the people, the elite, and the general will. See Hawkins and Kaltwasser (2019: 5); Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017: 9 ff.).
26. In brief, the difference at stake here is that "discourse," for both Laclau and Foucault, is a form of organizing knowledge that constitutes social relations in specific ways. Discourse is an effect of the power to define what counts as legitimate knowledge. As a material social system, this understanding of "discourse" cannot be reduced to a linguistic affair. By contrast, empirical-oriented "discourse analysis" studies the use of written or spoken language in a certain social context. Language is the

object of study of discourse analysis, be it text (such as newspapers, personal correspondence and other legal or political documentation) or talk (such as interviews or testimonies).

27. Laclau (2005).
28. Ure (2015: 608).
29. Geuss (2016: 183).

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