What do we mean by populism?

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In the first major publication on global populism, Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner (1969, 1) wrote ‘there can at present, be no doubt about the importance of populism. But no one is quite clear just what it is’ (emphasis in original). Peter Wiles (1969, 166) corroborated their assessment when he wrote in the same volume, ‘to each his own definition of populism, according to the academic axis he grinds’. For the next fifty years or so, scholars engaged in conceptual debates. Four broad conceptualisations of populism are prominent nowadays: a set of ideas, a political strategy, a political style, and a political logic. Interestingly, and despite the fact that advocates of these concepts present theirs as the most useful, scholars continue to combine concepts or to develop their own definition of populism. For instance several contributors to three handbooks of populism combine different conceptual perspectives or develop their own (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser, Taggart, Ochoa Espejo and Ostiguy, 2017; de la Torre 2019).

The first section of this chapter briefly maps out what scholars say populism is. Then their different conceptualisation strategies are analysed. The third follows Nadia Urbinati’s (2019) suggestion that since it would be very difficult to find an agreement on the genus of populism, scholars should focus instead on what it does when seeking power and once in government. The last section focuses on how populists use the media.

Searching for the right concept

Sociologists and historians first used the concept of populism to describe a particular phase or stage in the modernisation process linked to the transition from an agrarian to an industrial and urban society. Richard Hofstadter in The Age of Reform argued that the US Populist Party of the 1890s was the product of an agrarian crisis and a transitional stage in the history of agrarian capitalism. Its base of support was those sectors of society that had attained a low level of education, whose access to information was poor, and who were so completely shut out from access to the centres of power that they felt themselves completely deprived of self-defence and subjected to unlimited manipulation by those who wielded power (1955, 71). Populists aimed to restore a golden age, and their utopia ‘was in the past and not in the future’ (1955, 62).

Sociologist Gino Germani (1978) viewed populism as a transitional stage provoked by the modernisation of society. Relying on modernisation and mass society theories, he argued that
abrupt processes of modernisation such as urbanisation and industrialisation produced masses in a state of anomie that became available for top-down mobilisation. The social base of Peronism was the new working class, made up of recent migrants who were not socialised into working-class culture and therefore could be mobilised from the top by a charismatic leader.

These pioneer studies reduced class interest to the alleged irrationality of rural dwellers and recent migrants. Germani critics showed that the working class supported Perón because, as secretary of labor, he addressed many of their demands for better working conditions and salaries and the right to win strikes. Similarly, historians showed that the US Populist Party ‘resembled a type of reformist and evolutionary social democracy’ (Postel 2016, 119) and that populist followers were not irrational masses.

Germani critics used dependency theory and Marxism to argue that populism was a multiclass alliance between the industrial bourgeoisie, the working class, and the middle class that supported industrialisation via state intervention in the economy (Ianni 1973). Import substitution industrialisation was a response to the Great Depression and was based on nationalistic policies: the redistribution of income to create an internal market, tariffs, and other state protections and incentives to create local industries. When this strategy of development failed in the 1970s and was replaced by neoliberal models that minimised the role of the state in the economy and opened markets to globalisation, it was assumed that populism had run its course. The military dictatorships of the 1970s put an end to democracy, repressed workers, and dismantled unions, thus abolishing what many sociologists argued were the social bases of populism.

Yet in the 1980s, populism reemerged with democratisation. A new brand of populists continued to use populist rhetoric and styles to appeal to the poor and the excluded. Alberto Fujimori, president of Peru (1990–2000), and Carlos Menem (1989–1999) in Argentina abandoned state protectionism and tariffs and advocated for open markets, globalisation, and a minimal and lean state. To make sense of populism as a political phenomenon not reduced to economics policies or a particular class base, scholars studied it as a political style, a strategy, an ideology, or a political logic.

Populism is a style of doing politics that appeals to what elites consider ‘bad manners’ (Moffit 2016; Ostiguy 2017). If elites appropriate for themselves what are considered good manners — refined, sophisticated tastes and styles; technocratic and rational discourses — populists use words and performances that shock elites as vulgar, distasteful, low, and unlearned. Populism is a form of cultural resistance. Instead of proposing to educate the low into the good, sophisticated, and rational manners of the rich and refined, they challenge their claims to cultural superiority.

Populism can also be conceptualised as a political strategy to get power and to govern (Weyland 2001). Leaders appeal directly to their constituencies, bypassing traditional mediating institutions like parties and unions. If the focus of the previous approach was on the leaders’ performances, those who identify it a strategy study the resources that populists mobilised to get to power and their tactics to stay in office. Populist leaders, they argue, are more pragmatic than ideological, and their main goal is to get to and to stay in power. When institutions are fragile, populism in power often leads to competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Loxton 2019). By competitive authoritarianism, they mean regimes that use elections that take place on skewed playing fields that make it very difficult for the opposition to win them. Using the term competitive authoritarianism means that these regimes are no longer diminished forms of democracy. They have become autocracies.

Populism has been characterised as a set of ideas about politics. Cas Mudde (2004, 543) defined populism as ‘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’. In Populism in Europe and the Americas, he and his coauthor Cristóbal Rovira-Kaltwasser (2012, 8–9) argued that

populism is in essence a form of moral politics, as the distinction between ‘the elite’
and ‘the people’ is first and foremost moral (i.e. pure vs. corrupt), not situational
(e.g. position of power), socio-cultural (e.g. ethnicity, religion), or socioeconomic
(e.g. class).

Accordingly populists construct politics as a Manichaean struggle between the forces of good
and evil. If populism is a set of ideas about politics, it encompasses political parties and hori-
izontal social movements like Occupy Wall Street or the Indignados in Spain and Greece that
do not have leaders.

When populism is analysed as a political practice, the focus is not on the content of its ide-
ology, policies, or class base; rather, it is on its formal logic (Laclau 2005). Populism aims to
rupture existing institutional systems, build enemies, and reduce all political and social conflict
to the confrontation between two antagonistic camps. Populism creates strong identities of the
people by constructing them as antagonistic to a series of enemies. The name of the leader gives
unity to all demands for change and renewal.

Laclau contrasts everyday mundane and administrative politics with those exceptional
moments of a populist rupture that, according to him, constitute ‘the political’. He argues
that the division of society into two antagonistic camps is required to put an end to exclusion-
ary institutional systems and to forge an alternative order. In order to create strong, emotional
popular identities, an enemy need to be built. Politics becomes an antagonistic confrontation
between two camps: the people versus the oligarchy. The logic of populism is anti-institutional;
it is based on the construction of a political frontier and in a logic that could lead to the rup-
ture of the system. The name of the leader becomes the symbol that unites all the demands for
change.

Conceptual strategies

Historians and interpretative social scientists acknowledge that the complexity of populism
cannot be reduced to one main attribute or to a generic and universal definition. Hence, they
use accumulative concepts of populism or ideal types that list a series of attributes. For instance,
Jean Cohen (2019, 13–14) lists ten criteria to identify a movement, leader, or party as more or
less populist:

1 Appeal to ‘the people’ and ‘popular sovereignty’ – empty signifiers deployed to unify het-
erogeneous demands and grievances.
2 Pars pro toto logic that extracts the ‘authentic people’ from the rest of the population via a
logic of equivalences by which a set of demands are constructed into a substantive particu-
lar identity that stands for the whole.
3 Discourse that pits the people against elites – the political-economic, cultural ‘establish-
ment’ cast as usurpers who corrupt, ignore, or distort the ‘authentic’ people’s will.
4 Construction of a frontier of antagonism along the lines of a Schmittian friend/enemy
conception of the political that identifies alien others who violate the people’s values and
whom elites unfairly coddle.
Carlos de la Torre

5 Unification, typically through strong identification with a leader (or, more rarely, a unified leadership group) claiming to embody the authentic people’s will and voice, incarnating their unity and identity.
6 Focus on the symbolic and authorisation dimensions of political representation.
7 Performative style of leadership that mimics the habitus (dress, speech, manners) of the authentic people.
8 Dramatic and rhetorical forms of argumentation linking talk about making the nation great again to discourses about the restoration of honor, centrality, and political influence to the authentic people.
9 Focus on alleged crises, national decline, and an orientation to the extraordinary dimensions of politics.
10 Dependence on a host ideology for content and moral substance.

Positivist-oriented scholars argue that cumulative concepts do not allow for the accumulation of knowledge. They argue that enumerating a series of attributes to define populism results in conceptual stretching that lumps ‘together under the same conceptual roof dissimilar political parties’ (Pappas 2019, 29). They are uneasy with gradations and, hence, opt to define populism in contrast with what it is not. The goal of positivists is to produce a generic definition of populism that can travel and explain experiences in different historical times and places. Their first task is to designate the field of populism. Kurt Weyland (2001) argues that the domain of populism is politics understood as strategic struggles over power. Takis Pappas (2019, 33–35) locates it in the domain of democratic politics; he defines populism as ‘democratic illiberalism’. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) argue that its domain is morality and that populism is, hence, a form of Manichaean politics. While for Weyland and Pappas, the role of the leader is crucial, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser do not define the leader as central and broaden the populist camp to attitudes, movements, and parties.

The concept of populism hence refers to a vague ideology that the people use to challenge the elites, a strategy and a style to get to power and to govern, and political practices that produce popular identities antagonistic to the power bloc. The concept can be constructed as an ideal type with multiple traits or as a minimal concept. Given these profound epistemological differences, scholars regularly argue for abandoning the concept of populism altogether. Historian Enzo Traverso (2019, 16) contends that the concept of populism is an ‘empty shell, which can be filled by the most disparate political contents’. Yet despite his call to abolish this term from the vocabulary of the social sciences, he uses it to describe Trump as a ‘populist politician’ for example (Traverso 2019, 20).

Instead of abandoning populism, it might be more productive to acknowledge that it is an irreplaceable and inescapable part of our political and social vocabulary. Populism is ‘a basic concept deployed in the public languages in which political controversy was conducted’ (Ritcher 2005, 227). As such, it does not carry a single indisputable meaning, and a variety of conflicting constituencies passionately struggle to make their definitions ‘authoritative and compelling’ (Baehr 2008, 12).

What populism does

Instead of trying to resolve endless disputes about what populism is, perhaps it is more fruitful to focus on what it does. Nadia Urbinati (2019) argues that regardless of how leaders and parties are defined, there are a series of actions, words, and performances through which we can see populists in action.
What do we mean by populism?

Creating enemies

Populists do not face political rivals with whom one could disagree. They transform rivals into existential and symbolic enemies. Differently from fascists, who physically eliminate their enemies, populists do not kill them. Instead they depict them as the dangerous other. In a different way from a rival that one tries to convince about one's point of view in an argument, an enemy needs to be contained because it is an existential threat. Populists are constantly manufacturing enemies. When seeking power, their enemy is broadly cast as the establishment. Once in power, their enemies become particular political, economic, and cultural elites who supposedly hold the real power.

Populists differ on whom they construct as the enemies of the people. Right-wing populists often face two types of enemies: cosmopolitan elites above and dependents of colour below. The enemies of European right-wing populists are the global elites of the European community, their cronies at home, and immigrants who do not work and live off the hard-earned money of taxpayers. Similarly, the Tea Party and Donald Trump struggle against dependents of colour below, who allegedly live off welfare paid by white producers, and cosmopolitan liberal elites, who tax middle-class makers above.

Racist arguments are used to cast whole populations not just as inferior but as inherently culturally different and inassimilable. The other is imagined as a plague, a virus, or a disease that could contaminate the purity of the people. Their culture and/or their religion is not just different; it is the opposite of the good values and morals of the host ethnic population. Right-wing populists hence politicise emotions such as fear to the different, dangerous, and treacherous other. They argue that citizens cannot be complicit with cosmopolitan elites who allow for the massive entrance of the dangerous other to European or American neighbourhoods and schools.

The other becomes dehumanised. In Europe the Muslim immigrant, for instance, is perceived as an ‘infection agent’ (Traverso 2019, 75), whereas in America the illegal Mexican immigrant, a term that encompasses populations of Latin American origins, is seen as the source of evil. Because ‘Mexican’ immigrants were previously cast as the subhuman other who is willing to do any trick in order to enter into the US, even renting children or putting them at risk in rivers and deserts, they needed to be punished. Families were separated, and ‘Mexican’ children and babies were put in cages in immigrant detention centres. Fear leads to lack of empathy, dehumanisation, and perhaps to extreme measures of containment such as mass detention and deportation.

The enemies of left-wing populists are the economic and political elites of the establishment, the 1 percent, the oligarchy, or the caste. For the most part, leftists do not use xenophobic and racist arguments. If the right politicises fears to the danger of contamination of culture, religion, and race, the left focuses on the angers produce by socioeconomic and political exclusions and by systemic inequalities. They politicise anger, indignation, and envy. These emotions could lead to mobilisation against those who are at the top because of oligarchic privileges or corruption.

Populism’s pars pro toto dynamic and the leader as the embodiment of the true people

Populists do not aim to give power back to all the population. They do not appeal to Rousseau general will either. They aim to empower only a section of the population, those excluded who represent the right and truthful people. The rest are depicted as the oligarchy, the caste, or those
sectors of the population who are not part of the sincere and good people. The *pars pro toto* dynamic of populism is inherently exclusionary. When ethnic and religious criteria are used to name the real or authentic people, these constructs attempt against modern and plural civil societies. However it could be argued that casting the 1 percent or the oligarchy as not part of the people is not such a terrible problem; after all, the hyper-rich and powerful live from the work of the poor. The problem is that even in left-wing populism, the *pars pro toto* dynamic excludes the organisations of the poor that do not uncritically support the leader. The exclusionary dynamic of left-wing populism is not only used against class enemies but also and fundamentally against political enemies. After all, the leader is the person who names those who belong to the good people, and his enemies could become former members of the populist coalition or anybody critical of the leader’s claim to embody the people.

For populism to be successful, it needs a leader; otherwise it remains at the margins of the political system. A leader is built as the authentic and truthful representative of the right people. Even when populists are inclusionary, it is on the condition of accepting the leadership of the wise leader.

**Populists challenging power, populists in power, and populist regimes**

Populists attempting to get to power, populists in office, and populist regimes are not the same. When challenging power, populists politicise issues that other politicians ignore or do not address. They show the failures of democracies and protest against inequalities. However for populism to develop into a new ‘ism’, it has to get to power (Finchelstein 2017). Once in office, populists show their true colours and characteristics. Populists are not regular politicians elected for a set period of time. They have the mission of liberating their people. Elections are not just regular democratic contestations for power. They become gargantuan battles between the past of oppression and the liberation to come. Populists rule as if they have the urgency to transform all democratic disputes into existential battles between antagonistic camps. They confront and manufacture enemies. Traditional political elites, media elites, or the leaders of social movements and non-governmental organisations could become enemies of the leader, the people, and the nation.

When in power, populists follow a similar playbook. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblat (2018, 78–96) show how in nations as different as Venezuela, Hungary, Poland, Turkey, and the US, populists followed similar strategies to consolidate their rule. (1) Capturing the referees such as the judicial system, law enforcement, intelligence agencies, tax authorities, regulatory agencies, and institutions in charge of horizontal accountability. (2) Silencing opponents by buying or bribing them. Using the law instrumentally to try to quiet critics by fining newspapers or suing journalists. Regulating the activities of organisations of civil society like non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In some cases weakening independent social movements by creating alternative organisations from the top. Silencing businesspeople using tax authorities and hushing important cultural figures. (3) Changing the rules of the game by reforming the constitution and changing electoral rules. (4) Fabricating or taking advantage of crises to concentrate power and crack down on the opposition.

Populists pretend to follow the rule of law; hence, it is imperative for them to control the legal system to use laws to punish critics and, in some cases, to stay indefinitely in power. When populists are able to change constitutions and to regulate the public sphere, control civil society, and change the educational system, they become regimes. Populist regimes combine a democratic commitment to elections as the only legitimate tool to elect and remove politicians with
What do we mean by populism?

undemocratic views of political rivals as enemies and conceptions of the people as unitary actors and, in some cases, of the political theologies of the leader as the savior of the people.

Analysing populists as particular regimes better captures their autocratic and inclusionary practices than branding them competitive authoritarian. Characterising populist regimes as competitive authoritarian misses the inclusionary processes provoked by some populist regimes. From Perón to Chávez, populists distributed income and, to a lesser extent, wealth; reduced poverty; and valued the worth of common and non-white citizens, while simultaneously transforming a person into the redeemer of a unitary people. Populists acted in the name of democracy, and their projects were to improve not to destroy it. Moreover, because elections gave legitimacy to these regimes, they aimed to control and regulate but not to destroy the institutional framework of democracy, fundamental liberties, autonomous civil societies, and an independent public sphere.

Differentiating populisms

Not all populisms are the same. Right-wing populists like Donald Trump, Rodrigo Duterte, and Jair Bolsonaro are nostalgic and backward looking. They do not propose to radicalise democracy. On the contrary their projects aim to limit rights in order to strengthen law and order. Other right-wing populists aim to preserve European welfare states by excluding non-natives. Differently Hugo Chávez and other left-wing populists promised to include the excluded, to improve the quality of democratic participation, and even to create utopias. Chávez proposed socialism of the twentieth-first century as an alternative to neoliberalism and communism, and Rafael Correa and Evo Morales proposed alternative relations between humans, nature, and development.

Populists don’t only differ across the right and left axis. Light and full-blown populism should be differentiated. By light populism, I refer to political parties and politicians who occasionally use populist tropes and discourses but do not aim to rupture existing institutions. Under this criterion, Bernie Sanders, who did not break with the Democratic Party to create a third party in 2016 nor in 2020, is a light populist. Full-blown populists aim to rupture existing institutions by polarising society and the polity into two camps of enemies and constructing a leader as the symbol of all the demands for change and renewal. Light populists are almost indistinguishable from other politicians in contemporary democracies who appeal to trust in their personas and use the mass media to bypass traditional parties. Full-blown populists often use democratic institutional mechanisms and mass mobilisation to try to bring change. When seeking power, full-blown populists appeal to constituencies that the elites despise or ignore. They use discourses and performances to shock and disturb the limits of the permissible and to confront conventions.

Populism and the media

Populists are media innovators. Eva Perón in the 1940s and 50s made use of the radio to directly communicate with her followers. In the 1990s populists such as Silvio Berlusconi used television to bypass parties. In the twenty-first century, the Five Star Movement and Podemos use the web to organise and mobilise followers. When seeking power populists often raise important questions about how democratic the media is. They often challenge media monopolies and the authority of cultural elites to claim to be public opinion. Yet the populist critique of the media needs to be distinguished from the populist solutions and their practices in office.
When in power the body of the populist leader – which is no other than the body of the people struggling for its liberation – becomes omnipresent. For seven years Eva Perón was present everywhere. Her face was on millions of billboards in streets and in stores, the state radio broadcast her speeches daily, and she had a prominent role in the weekly news shown in all Argentinean movie theaters (Sebreli 2008). Hugo Chávez and Rafael Correa put their images or slogans from their regimes in visible spots along highways and cities. They used mandatory TV and radio messages to constantly broadcast their images and to be seen in newspapers, on television, and on social media, as they were constantly on Twitter and Facebook. They had weekly television and radio shows on which Chávez talked for about six hours and Correa for about three. They marked the news agenda because, in addition to entertaining their audiences they announced important policies.

Similarly, Donald Trump’s image is everywhere at all times. Pundits are constantly discussing and analysing his latest tweet. The obsessive need of television for politics as entertainment meets the compulsive need of the populist to become a permanent feature in citizens’ everyday lives. He occupies the centre stage of media discussions, transforming politics into melodrama and sheer emotional entertainment. For some his image produces pleasure and enjoyment as his attacks on political correctness and his racist, homophobic, xenophobic, and misogynist remarks appear to be sincere expressions of libidinal energy repressed by social conventions. For others his words produce fear, anguish, disgust, and even nausea. The strong emotions that his body and words provoke put him at the centre of conversations in the public and private spheres.

Populists as diverse as Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, and Rafael Correa have embarked on wars against the media. These leaders devalue truth and the practices of professional journalism. Whereas Orbán and Trump favour particular private media venues, control and regulation of the media by the state was at the centre of the leftist populist struggle for hegemony (Waisbord 2013). Chávez and Correa enacted laws to regulate the content the media could publish; the state took away radio and television frequencies from critics, becoming the main communicator in these nations.

Conclusion

Focusing on what populists do allows us to avoid endless conceptual debates. Instead of continuing to search for the right concept, this move to practice helps explain the commonalities and differences between varieties of populism. Some politicise fears of cosmopolitanism using race, ethnicity, and culture to mark the boundaries of inclusion to the people and the nation. Other populists give meanings to feelings and emotions of exclusion and anger at economic and political elites who pretend that neoliberalism is the only technically acceptable economic policy. We need to differentiate populists seeking office, populists in power, and populist regimes. Light and full-blown populists are not the same.

When Ionesco and Gellner published their work, populism was absent from Europe. In 2018 ‘the governments of eight countries of the European Union (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia) were led by far-right nationalist, and xenophobic parties’ (Traverso 2019, 3). Populism is here to stay. Our task as citizens, students, and scholars is to understand its complexities without demonising it. We have to comprehend why these parties mobilise citizens without using stereotypes that label followers as irrational. The populist critique needs to be taken seriously, yet we have to ask if their solutions will actually return power to the people or lead to the disfigurement of democracy (Urbinati 2014) or, even worse, to its slow death.
What do we mean by populism?

References


