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Again, What Is Populism?

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Am I kidding? We still do not know what populism is? We do not know what we are talking about when we talk about populism? We are ignorant about the topic of an entire subdiscipline of political science? After tons of publications, various handbooks? With entire research centers, networks and an academic journal dedicated to populism studies? Well, not quite.

"The meaning of a word is its use in the language," Ludwig Wittgenstein famously said (1968: § 43). Populism has many uses and meanings. In the sphere of politics, it is in the main a rhetorical weapon that serves its users to denounce anybody who appeals to citizens in ways they disapprove of (because they find it irresponsible, indecent, menacing, mendacious, vague, unrealistic, or whatever).

In the study of politics, we know that we need to be more precise than that and we have been trying hard … and have been failing. We have identified the antagonism between "the people" and "the elite" as the discursive core of populism. I hold this to be a good start, but no more. For "populism" to designate something distinct and something interesting, we need to use the concept in narrower and more precise fashion. Too, if we want to understand its tense relationship with liberal democracy, we need to ground it in democratic theory.

The New Common Sense

Academic research on populism has been the terrain of seemingly endless conceptual disputes. Authors have been complaining about persisting conceptual "confusion and ambivalence" (Moffitt 2020: 94), "the absence of clear conceptualizations and the proliferation of ad hoc definitions" (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 527), and "fundamental disagreements about what populism actually means" (Cole 2022: 5). Some scholarly conceptions of populism are thin, others thick; some are binary, others continuous; some authors analyze attitudes, others discourses; some capture opposition strategies, others forms of government; and many are critical but some supportive of the phenomenon (for an overview, see e.g. Mansbridge and Macedo 2019).

Nevertheless, over the past years, the bewildering competition among incongruent notions of populism has been gradually superseded by an emergent conceptual consensus. The so-called "ideational approach" to

populism has become “dominant in the political science literature” (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 527). It defines populism as a “thin-centered ideology” that understands politics as “a Manichean struggle between ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’” (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 532).

Almost two decades ago, Cas Mudde laid the early foundations for this consensus when he 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” (2004: 543). More and more authors have been sidestepping conceptual controversies by embracing his conception which, by now, has turned into the “most widely cited definition” (Aslanidis 2016: 88) of populism.

Its first part (the antagonism of citizens against elites) involves a conception of societal cleavages, its second (the invocation of the general will) a conception of politics. Many authors quietly drop the latter, as it is unclear what it implies, and focus on the former, the people-elite cleavage. At present, even if some definitions highlight the relation between populists and their followers (e.g. Weyland 2021 and Ostiguy 2017), there is “a fair degree of agreement among academics” that “populism revolves around a central division between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’” (Moffit 2020: 10).

Placing the conflict between citizens and elites at the center of our understanding of populism is plausible, but insufficient. It fails to distinguish populist actors from ordinary critics of democracy, democratizing movements, and authoritarian propagandists. For the concept to be fruitful we need to sharpen and circumscribe it. We also need to abandon the idea that populism is a free-floating ideology and take its democratic context seriously.

Who Are the Relevant “Enemies of the People”?

Sometimes, the term “populism” is used to describe politicians who appeal to citizens by using the language of “the people.” Other times, it is meant to describe those who entertain certain notions of the people (the humble and poor, carriers of virtue and wisdom, the unitary subject of history) or those who stage relations of closeness and empathy with the people (the man of the people, the one who meets them as equals). Yet, if the point of populism is not a conception of a *community* (as in nationalism), but a conception of *conflict* – between two “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983), “the people” and “the elite” –, the question is: who are the elites populism opposes? Who are its defining “enemies of the people”?

Only Elites Count

As anti-elitism is a defining feature of established definitions of populism, it seems clear that we need to look for the antagonists of the people above, in the spheres of power, not below, among the poor and powerless. The "high-low dimension" is a defining feature of populism (Ostiguy 2017: 73). The recurrent identification of ethno-nationalist anti-immigrant parties as "populist" thus runs counter to its conceptual core. Stalin, who persecuted large swaths of the people (such as peasants, prisoners of war, or national minorities) as "enemies of the people," wasn't a populist. Nor are those who wage symbolic wars on the welfare recipients, the poor, the homeless, or on ethnic or cultural minorities. It's a classic trick of conservative defenders of the status quo: redirecting the people's ire from elites to underdogs. Why should we call them populists?

Only Political Elites Count

If populism contraposes the people against the elite, who are the relevant elites? The candidates are numerous. However, if politicians rail against big enterprise, foreign powers, individual oligarchs, overzealous bureaucrats, the Catholic Church, the educated, or "the Jewish world conspiracy," what is the need or analytical gain of calling them "populists"? We already have a vocabulary for such visions of conflict: anticapitalism, anti-imperialism, egalitarianism, liberalism, anticlericalism, anti-intellectualism, and antisemitism. Why should we group their carriers under the label of populism?

The general question is: Why should we describe any notion of conflict that involves inequalities of power between ordinary people and other actors as populist? What do we gain from conceiving populism as an omnibus concept that covers any kind of popular struggle against social and political domination? What is the analytic value of situating it at such a high level of abstraction? What do we gain from describing any quest for social recognition and social justice as a "populist" project (except to disqualify the underlying demands)?

If we want the concept of populism to capture something specific, and if we want it to capture a relevant phenomenon that other concepts fail to capture, we should stop conceiving it as generic anti-elitism. Yet, who remains if we strike social, economic, religious, and cultural elites from the list of populist targets? Well, political elites remain. What seems to make populists distinctive is not their claim that the people are under threat from any kind of elites, but from *political* elites. Rather than generalized opposition to elites we might conceive populism as generalized opposition to the political establishment (in a broad sense that includes politicians as well as public officials and epistemic authorities like journalists and experts).

Only Democratic Elites Count

Now, if we narrow the focus of populist attacks to the political elite, does the concept apply regardless of context, across political regimes? I side with those who hold that "populism is only thinkable in the context of representative democracy" (Müller 2017: 77, see also Pappas 2016: 29). Just consider, which would be the substance of populism under authoritarianism?

On the one hand, when opposition actors who struggle against an authoritarian regime describe the relationship between the autocratic elite and the people as antagonistic, they do not engage in populism but in elemental political analysis. It makes no sense conceiving their opposition against dictatorship as "populist" (e.g. Nokhrin 2021). Of course, they do appeal to the people and denounce entrenched political elites. Yet, as opponents of dictatorship they are not proponents of populism, but democracy.

On the other hand, in modern times in which the people, not God or blood lineage, are the source of political legitimacy, most dictators present themselves as enlightened embodiments of the popular will and valiant defenders of the people against its imaginary enemies. What sense does it make classifying them as populists? Figures like Tajikistan's Emomali Rahmon or Belarus' Alexander Lukashenko are no populists (Jenne, Hawkins, and Castanho 2021: 180). They are dictators who do what dictators do: trying to monopolize the definition of the public good (in times of popular sovereignty) and of public enemies as well.

So, what makes populists interesting in terms of democratic theory and practice, is not their antagonism against any kind of political elites but against democratic elites. Outside democracy, populism is meaningless, its political anti-elitism commonsensical. Still, why do we care about it in democracies? Why is it interesting? Why worrisome? The answer is, I believe: because it denies the existence of democracy within democracy.

The Redescription of Democracy

Liberal democracy creates a structural divide between citizens and their professional representatives. The ambition of keeping the two from drifting too far apart is not antidemocratic per se (see Laclau 2018, Mansbridge and Macedo 2019: 70–73, Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). If populists are meant to be distinctive political actors, they must do more than denounce this divide. They must do more, that is, than critical citizens do every day: criticize the government and the opposition, too.

What populists actually do, as most students of populism would agree, is to define the cleavage between citizens and their democratic representatives as *the central societal conflict*. What does this involve? Sometimes, it may be hard to decide whether the anti-political-

establishment cleavage (Schedler 1996) is the main one or just a secondary or derivative one. After all, regardless of who causes a problem under democracy, actors may always blame the political establishment for its existence or persistence.

Still, at its extremes, the antagonism between citizens and political elites involves something quite dramatic: the denial of democracy. Populists are not mere challenger parties that strive to fill representational gaps by introducing new issues (like social inequality, immigration, or the climate crisis). Their grievance is deeper and more comprehensive. And it is not substantive, but systemic. Populists denounce radical failures of democratic representation in the hands of self-serving elites who betray "the spirit of democracy" (Diamond 2008). They redescribe existing democracies as authoritarian systems. In fact, they proclaim the end of democracy.

Many of the political actors whom we have been describing as populists, from Marine Le Pen to Pedro Castillo, from Jörg Haider to Vladimir Mečiar, from Nigel Farage to Andrés Manuel López Obrador, from Podemos to the German AfD … seem to fit that description very well. Yet, it demands three precising clarifications.

First, populists do not offer *structural* diagnoses of democratic failure but *moral* ones. The failures of representation they denounce are not the work of impersonal forces, like global capitalism or organized crime, but the responsibility of collective actors. Populism involves the attribution of blame to the political elite.

Second, in their discourse, populists do not denounce the failures of democracy to *abolish* it but to *renew* it. They are not revolutionary movements that promise structural transformations. They pursue their agenda within the normative horizon of liberal democracy, within democratic institutions and practices. Their discourse may contain authoritarian elements (see e.g. Müller 2017, Urbinati 2019) and as governing parties they may end up damaging or even dismantling democracy (see e.g. Levitsky and Loxton 2013, Ginsburg and Aziz 2018). Yet, they are not authoritarian ideologues who propose to replace liberal democracy by some form of dictatorship. They are not fascists, monarchists, Islamists, anarchists, or communists. They are electoral movements that promise a simple remedy to all problems: alternation in power. Vote for us! Not revolution is their solution but their own moral superiority.

Third, populists strive to introduce an axis of conflict that is orthogonal to established dimensions like left vs right or liberalism vs conservatism. Actors like Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, or Cristina Kirchner position themselves on one side of the dominant political divide and denounce

all those on the other side as evil enemies of democracy. They are not populists but agents of partisan intolerance.

Populism Is Not an Ideology (a Set of Abstractions)

The "ideational" school conceives populism as a "thin" ideology that articulates "a general belief about how the political universe operates" (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 514–515, see also Mudde 2004: 544, Schröder 2023).

Ideologies are sets of ideas that are (more or less) disconnected from reality. Why should we understand populism as a disconnected, context-independent set of propositions? When populists describe the democratic political establishment as the enemy of the people, they do not offer a political philosophy. When they redescribe democracies as authoritarian systems, they do not offer a theory of democracy. What they do is to offer a *diagnosis*, a normative evaluation based on empirical claims. Rather than free-floating ideas about the world, they articulate an assessment of concrete political systems. They do not proclaim eternal conflict between elites and citizens, but the betrayal of citizens in real existing democracies.

As a matter of fact, the idea that populism is a bundle of general ideas about the nature of politics has run into empirical problems. For instance, in an effort to measure the presence of populist ideology in manifestoes of 144 parties from 27 countries in Europe and the Americas, thirty-one parties earned scores above 0.5 on a scale of 0 to 2, indicating "a non-negligible presence" of "elements of populism." In two regions that are presumed to be rife with populism, only five of these parties (three of them presiding electoral authoritarian regimes) got scores above 1.5 (Hawkins and Castanho 2019: 31 and 33). Identifying "populist ideology," it seems, helps little for identifying populists. Proliferating efforts to measure "populist attitudes" contain a mixed bag of items (see Castanho et al. 2020: Supplementary information 2) but similarly seem to have a hard time identifying populist voters (Castanho et al. 2020: 418–420, Jungkunz 2021).

But It Is Ideological (a Falsification of Reality)

There is another meaning to ideology. Rather than a set of ideas that is independent of empirical contexts, it may denote a set of ideas that contradicts empirical realities. Is populism ideological in this sense? Is it a distorting representation of reality?

The moral condemnation of political elites, I suggested above, is a sign of populism under democracy and a banner of democratization under authoritarianism. If we accept the idea that the meaning of anti-political-elite rhetoric depends on its systemic context, we need to *establish* that context *before* we can apply the concept of "populism."

When political actors proclaim that elected politicians act as "the enemies of the people," we need to know whether they inhabit an electoral authoritarian regime or a democracy. If it is the former, their critique is appropriate, and we may view them as democratizing agents. If it is the latter, their critique is misguided, and we may label them populists. Of course, in a democracy, too, their rhetoric may contain elements of truth. It may point to real democratic deficits (as it usually does). But their description of democracy as an authoritarian regime will be wrong and, in this sense, ideological (even though gray zones of genuine controversy do exist in between electoral democracies and autocracies).

Scholars who work in the tradition of Ernesto Laclau treat "populism" as an expression of healthy conflict between those "below" and those "above" and therefore do not view populist critiques of democracy as distorted or ideological but as truthful. Yet, conceiving populism as a distorted, untrue, and therein ideological critique of real-existing democracies resonates with the common observation that populists are avid users and producers of conspiracy theories, political paranoia, mythical thinking, fairy tales, imaginary threats and enemies, hyperbole, lies, disinformation, and misinformation (see e.g. Castanho, Vegetti, and Littvay 2017). It also resonates with actual uses of "populism" in public debate.

Frequently, only those actors whose campaigns against the political establishment appear as inappropriate (false, exaggerated, or distorted) earn the label of "populists." Just consider some democratizing political actors, like Guatemala's new president Bernardo Arévalo, who use typical populist discourse. They describe the political elite of their country as corrupt and undemocratic, and so do scholars of politics as well as outside observers. Do we describe these actors as dangerous populists? No, as our diagnoses of democratic failure converge, we describe them as courageous agents of democratization.

The notion that populism represents a distorted form of democratic critique may be implicit in many uses of the term. Yet, making it explicit imposes huge burdens of justification on its application. If populist discourses are populist to the extent that we think they distort political realities rather than reflecting them, we cannot judge them on their own, in isolation from the democratic realities they attack. We can only know whether, and to what extent, some speaker's critical assessment of democracy is "populist" after we have done our own critical assessment of democracy. This implies serious argumentative work which puts an end to cheap uses of populism. There are no shortcuts. Putting quick labels on actors will not do.

Conclusion

Now, what, after all, is populism? The question is, of course, misleading. It suggests that there are empirical phenomena out there in the world which correspond to an abstract idea called "populism" which we need to define in a correct manner to understand them in a correct manner. However, the question is not: which is the correct understanding of populism? But rather: how can we conceive populism in a manner that captures a distinctive phenomenon and that allows us to understand its democratic relevance, its tense relationship with liberal democracy?

In my attempt to reconstruct the concept, I tried to save it from its omnivore tendencies. As I have been proposing, we should not apply it to all actors who exploit any kind of cleavage between elites and citizens but only to those who offer certain diagnoses of representative failure. We should limit it to those who claim that a democracy has turned into an oppressive, authoritarian system due to the moral failure of democratic elites, whom they propose to expel from power in order to restore the health of democracy.

By describing existing democracies as fraudulent systems of false appearances populists deny them democratic legitimacy. They participate in democratic regimes and compete in free and fair elections. Yet, in their discourse, they struggle against electoral authoritarian systems that only *simulate* democratic governance. They speak and act as if they were participating in a democratic farce. Populists, then, are less than ideological enemies of democracy but more than "ordinary" critics of democratic malfunction. Their distinctiveness lies in their structural ambiguity: *they participate in the democratic game while denying its existence*.

As their diagnosis of democratic failure is false, their promise of democratic renewal is so as well. While their diagnoses distort democratic realities, their remedies risk destroying them. To the extent that they discredit all established democratic actors, and with them, all established democratic institutions, they discredit all dissenting voices and all countervailing powers (see also Müller 2017). Their narrative of universal moral failure grants them a monopoly on democratic integrity which they invoke to capture public institutions and ignore public debates. Given their identitarian conception of representation (le peuple, c'est moi), they tend to favor extreme versions of "delegative democracy" (O'Donnell 1994) without checks and balances (see also Urbinati 2019). And as they declare democracy defunct and wage a fierce battle against an imaginary dictatorship, their commitment to democratic ground rules (which are based on reciprocal compliance) is called into question.

In consequence, there is some strange irony in contemporary populism. While populists *describe* existing democracies as electoral authoritarian regimes (façade democracies), there is an inherent risk that they actually *transform* existing democracies into electoral authoritarian regimes if they control the levers of power. They produce the very crisis of democracy they diagnose. Invoking the chimera of façade democracy as opposition actors, they are prone to turn it into reality once they gain power. We may consider both their diagnoses of democratic failure and their promises of democratic renewal false. Yet, unless we recognize their democratic ambiguity, we will fail to understand their appeal.

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