

# Populism in the Social Sciences

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As a concept, 'populism' has had an impressive academic career over the last couple of decades. Nevertheless, it is an 'essentially contested concept' (Cas Mudde<sup>1</sup>), meaning one whose usefulness as an analytical tool is still questioned. Geographically, populism is more often used to describe political phenomena in Europe and the Americas than in other parts of the world, mainly for historical reasons: these are the regions, where the term populism once was used by political actors to describe their own position – without any negative connotations being implied. Examples of self-described populists are

- the Russian *Narodniki*, urban revolutionary intellectuals who went 'into the people' (in particular to the peasants) in the hope of radicalising them and creating a revolutionary movement in the 1870s (a movement that spectacularly and tragically failed);
- *Boulangism* in late 19<sup>th</sup>-century France, a movement named after the

general and politician Boulanger, who wanted to replace the Third Republic's parliamentary system with a plebiscitary, grassroots-democracy republicanism;

- the USA's *People's Party* in the 1890s, a movement aiming at a combination of economic protectionism and social egalitarianism;
- and a variety of parties and movements representing the poorer sections of society and challenging the predominantly white postcolonial elites in 20<sup>th</sup> century Latin America.

Populism thus initially stood for rather diverse reformist and revolutionary movements and organisations fighting political 'elites', socio-economic inequality and political oppression at the level of the nation state, the dominant arena of late 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century politics. Recently, however, the label has been transformed by the media and academic commentariat into a relatively empty signifier that lumps together all those groups seen as critics

of really-existing democracies while aiming at a different way of involving 'the people' in politics. Consequently, a two-pronged dichotomy, beside the left-right and libertarian-authoritarian axes, is gaining in importance in mainstream political analysis: populism versus elitism, and, because of populism's allegedly homogenised and essentialised notion of 'the people', populism versus pluralism.

The fashionable academic interest in populism has produced, among other things, an *Oxford Handbook of Populism* (2017), which suggests three approaches to the populism phenomenon:

- The first and most widespread of these understands populism as an ideology.<sup>2</sup> The core of this ideology consists of the division of the polity into the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elites'. Populism stands for a programme of reintroducing the people's 'common sense' as a standard by which political decisions ought to abide. Because populism is a 'thin' ideology, it frequently uses 'host' ideologies, which define the people either socially (as a class) or ethnically (as a nation). Hence it becomes possible to identify both Trump and Sanders (or Gauland and Wagenknecht, or Farage and Galloway) as populists. Nuanced writers on populism, like the late Norberto Bobbio, distinguish an exclusionary right-wing from an inclusionary left-wing populism.
- The second approach sees populism as a form of identification and organisation – a top-down relationship between a leader and a movement based less on ideology than on personal identification with, and willing subordination to, the leader. S/he usually secures her/his following by referring to a common enemy/threat whose defeat requires loyalty. Hence, both Le Pen and Mélenchon are seen as populists even if they try to convince 'the people' of different kinds of threats (immigration versus globalisation). According to this approach, populism is, first of all, a strategy to gain political power. Once in power, populist leaders are not unlikely to rely ever more on authoritarian measures and less on persuasion – in this context scholars refer to examples like Hugo Chavez.
- The third approach defines populism as a way of political communication aimed at people's 'lower instincts'. Here, populism acts as a provocation for established 'high' ways of speaking about, and doing, politics. Whereas 'high' stands for a well-behaved, restrained, polite, disciplined, cosmopolitan, formalist register of political communication, 'low' stands for a coarse, emotional, personalist and nationalist one. Michelle Obama's statement 'when they go low, we go high' neatly summarises this distinction. The dichotomy is not

restricted to speech in a narrow sense but extends to accent, gestures, the challenging of taboos, etc. In political practice, the distinction is replicated in an emphasis on proceeding according to the rulebook ('high') or on 'getting things done', even if this involves violating checks and balances ('low'). Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump are the most salient representatives of this distinction in recent years. However, they also exemplify its problem: the apparent integrity of the 'high' way might be more appearance (based on the habitus expected in the political field) than substance, which contributes to the destabilisation of this position in times of political crisis.

To me, the problem with all three approaches seems to be that they share a normative bias: they see really-existing democracy, from an idealistic perspective, as the best of all forms of government and, formally, as static. If democracy has been, is, and will be perfect, then all challenges to the constitutional and practical status quo (whether ideological, strategic, or stylistic) are necessarily threats. From a realist and materialist perspective, however, democracy may be seen as an arena in which different actors challenge each other and struggle for power and influence – employing strategies that conform to certain legal requirements and procedures, like general elections, and others that are ethically

and legally dubious, like lobbying, as well as downright illegal ones, like money-for-favour arrangements. From this perspective, populism is not necessarily a danger. Consequently, for students of politics and democracy, it becomes more important to focus on the specific politics of populism (which can be inclusionary, egalitarian, anti-discriminatory, etc. or quite the opposite) than on the populism of politics.

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## **Notes**

1 Mudde, Cas (2017). "Populism: An Ideational Approach". *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Ed. Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul A. Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy. DOI: 10.1093/oxford-hb/9780198803560.013.1

2 Ideology is, by the representatives of this view, understood to be a false belief that serves the political interests of those concerned. There are, of course, many other definitions of ideology.