

Populism as narrative, myth making, and the ‘logic’ of political emotions

Camil Ungureanu and Alexandra Popartan

Abstract: ‘Populism’ has become one of the most confusing terms in debates in academia and the public sphere. In this paper, we distinguish between formal and substantive approaches to populism (for example, Ernesto Laclau’s formal ontology and the widespread view of populism as a ‘thin ideology’), and argue that they are one-sided: the formal approach that sets aside any questions of discursive content turns ‘populism’ into an ahistorical and catch-all concept; in turn, the substantive approach focused on ideological content tends to overlook the centrality of antagonistic political emotions and myth making in the current populist dynamic, namely its anti-ideological component. As a result, we look beyond the formal–substantive dichotomy and consider the dominant populism as a specific type of political narrative; key to this perspective are narrative patterns, political myth making and a constitutive ‘logic’ of affective intensification.

Keywords: Populism, ontology, ideology, political narrative, political emotions, Ernesto Laclau.

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POPULISM AS A CATCH-ALL CONCEPT

In a classic image frequent in Shakespeare's plays, the clown or the fool has licence to challenge the king's power by voicing uncomfortable truths. In contrast, these two figures have merged in the current populist crisis: the clown-king infatuated with his own power dissolves truth into an 'infinite jest' through a mixture of false claims, emotional manipulation and derisive humour. If 'every joke is a small revolution',¹ today's humour and derision have been put into the service of a worldwide conservative counterrevolution. By playing on negative and mixed emotions (from resentment and anger to gleeful spite at humiliating the other), populist leaders and forces have prospered in and intensified the present crisis of political representation.

'Populism' has become one of the most confusing terms in mass media, politics and academia. First, in the increasingly polarised mass media and political debate, 'populism' has turned into a catch-all concept used either to legitimise political forces that (supposedly) express people's real interests or, more often, to disqualify all political adversaries. Second, in academic debates, 'populism' has become an overstretched term as well; specified as right-wing, left-wing, or a mixture of both, 'populism' has come to apply to a wide variety of divergent and even opposite phenomena.

Consider two cases of overstretching the term 'populism' from Southern Europe. Vox, the political party that gained over 10 per cent of the regional vote in Andalucía in 2018 and did equally well in the 2019 general election, is seen as an example of right-wing populism with a focus on centralised government and economic liberalisation. Meanwhile, Podemos, currently the second largest political party in Spain, is considered a left-wing populist movement which aims to reduce poverty while protecting and restoring the environment. The catch-all application of 'populism' to such diverse phenomena leads to a 'night in which all cows are black'.² It is true that Vox and Podemos are both reactions to the mistrust in and the alienation from representative elites, yet they are opposite phenomena that cannot be simply qualified as 'populist'. In contrast to other extreme-right forces in Europe, Vox does not champion an anti-establishment discourse centred on the people–elite antagonism. Ideologically, Vox and its leader Santiago Abascal stand for an authoritarian nationalism based on an anti-deliberative rhetoric, the intensification of negative primordial emotions (anger, fear) and myth making. In particular, Vox exalts the myth of national-religious unity and purity, in addition to the myth of the 'macho' saviour. Together with other nationalist and populist forces in Europe, Vox crusades against the other—the immigrant, the Muslim, the feminist and, crucially in Spain, the Catalan separatist.

¹ Orwell (1945).

² Hegel (2019).

Institutionally, Vox emerged as a radicalised faction of the mainstream Popular Party rather than as an anti-establishment societal force. It is thus not surprising that, in early 2019, it 'naturally' built a governing alliance in Andalucía with its elder brother.

In contrast, while Podemos uses some tenets of the populist discourse explicitly inspired by Ernesto Laclau (for example, the critique of the elite's alienation from the demos; the struggle for hegemony), it is inadequately categorised as 'populist'.³ In terms of ideology and practice, Podemos as a political party active in the Spanish Parliament (and now part of the governing coalition) has not tried to oversimplify the political game into a confrontation between two mythical subjects: that is, a supposedly pure and unitary people fighting against the evil elite. In contrast to anti-elitist populist forces that tend to destabilise representative democracy, Podemos is better categorised as a democratic left-wing party that emphasises the centrality of mechanisms of participation and socio-political inclusion for invigorating democratic representativeness and for dealing with unsustainable inequalities among equal and free citizens. As a democratic party engaged in institutional politics, Podemos has generally aimed, from its specific ideological stand, to reconnect the representative elites to participative and deliberative practices. In short, even a cursory analysis of Vox and Podemos suggests that the use of 'populism' becomes questionable if stretched to cover too wide a spectrum of political forces that originate in the current democratic malaise.

POPULISM: FROM ONTOLOGY TO NARRATIVE

To get a more precise grasp of the current populist predicament, we can distinguish broadly between formal and substantive approaches to it: for example, Ernesto Laclau's social ontology or, alternatively, Cass Mudde's view of populism as 'thin ideology'.⁴ Both these formal and substantive perspectives are meritorious yet one-sided: the formal approach that sets aside any questions of discursive content turns 'populism' into an ahistorical and catch-all concept; in turn, the substantive approach focused on ideological content tends to overlook the centrality of antagonistic political emotions and myth making in the current populist dynamic, namely its anti-ideological component. We should thus look beyond the formal-substantive dichotomy and consider the dominant populism as a specific type of political narrative. Key to this perspective is not primarily ontology or ideology, but narrative patterns, political myth making and a constitutive 'logic' of affective intensification.

³Laclau (1985).

⁴Laclau (1985); Mudde (2004).

Consider first Laclau's formal ontology, which is the most philosophically ambitious treatment of populism. Its importance derives not only from its theoretical elaboration but also from its direct influence on different political movements in Latin America and Spain nowadays. In analysing populism, Laclau starts from a socio-ontological question: how are collective identities formed? His explanation is centred on the constructive role of discourse for collective identity-formation in the context of the power struggles for socio-political hegemony. From this perspective, populism regards the very logic of the formation of collective identities independently of them being democratic or fascist. The populist dynamic emerges when fragmented social demands that are not met by established institutions are gradually articulated in what Laclau calls 'chains of equivalence'.⁵ By means of these discursive chains, the initially heterogeneous demands are brought together to constitute a collective identity. This identity is not built in abstract but in antagonism with the existing hegemonic power (for example, the establishment, the elite), and is based on 'empty signifiers'. An 'empty signifier' is oftentimes a key concept (the people, the nation, the revolution) able to bind heterogeneous demands together through rhetorical mechanisms in the struggle for hegemony.

Laclau's perspective is a relevant corrective to the mainstream public reason approach to politics as it draws attention to the rhetorical–discursive mechanisms of constituting collective identities as well as to their embeddedness in dynamics of struggle and conflict.⁶ However, by bracketing the relevance of content, Laclau turns 'populism' into an ahistorical and catch-all concept. He builds his formal approach by taking a historically circumscribed phenomenon and turning it into a universal ontological dimension of any collective identity. This 'ontological populism' thus becomes an oversized concept incapable of capturing the specificity of populism as a modern phenomenon. Laclau's view runs into a further difficulty: he tends to normalise antagonism by taking confrontation with the incommensurable enemy to be 'essential' to politics. But this view of the antagonism between identities as incommensurable collectives blurs the line between deliberative and anti-deliberative forms of rhetoric, fosters polarisation and undermines democratic politics.

In contrast to Laclau, other approaches centre on the substance of populism. According to one widespread view, populism is a 'thin ideology'. As such, it involves the simplification of discourse ending up in the contrast between two antagonistic sides: the people and the elite. As Cass Mudde and other scholars underscore, populism is an ideology that considers society as divided and ultimately separated into two

⁵Laclau (1985); Ungureanu & Serrano (2018).

⁶Rawls (1971); Habermas (1992).

homogeneous and antagonistic groups: 'the pure people' versus the 'corrupt elite'.⁷ This approach is persuasive in pointing out the centrality of the elite–people antagonism and the simplifying character of populist discourse. However, the hypothesis of populism as ideology is one-dimensional, as it does not grant sufficient importance to the centrality of the narrative patterns, myth making and political emotions. The dominant populism today is a type of political narrative that, unlike the leftist and rightist ideologies in the traditional democracies, is not built primarily as a combination of general principles, arguments and a set of legislative and public policy proposals. On the contrary, it is generally based on simple and accessible narrative figures that are emotionally overloaded (for example, the myth of the saviour; the myth of the villain; the myth of the fallen or decayed world; the myth of the sacrificial victim). These transcontextual narrative patterns take a Manichean political form, particularly effective in times of social crisis and prolonged frustration, by drawing on the democratic imagination: the rescuing hero is thus identified as the people or its leader who fights against the evil represented by the villain—the elite.

In practice, the central features of the populist narrative can be present only in part, with various intensities and in different forms. A leader or a political party can adopt populist discursive tenets and strategies without necessarily being populist or anti-democratic. In specific circumstances, the rhetoric of the people against the elites can be a useful counter-movement against an ossified democratic regime turned plutocratic or oligarchic (the *indignados* movement in Spain is a case in point).

At the ideal-typical level, populism implies, firstly, the construction of the elite as enemy. In the populist scenario, the argument-based critique of the elites (or of an important part of the elites, as in the case of Podemos) is replaced by turning the various elite groups into a collective mythical subject.⁸ Populism constructs the people in a non-pluralistic way. It tends to imagine a homogeneous, incorrupt, good, and even heroic people: if the world is corrupt, a hero or rescuer is needed. The people are the innocent victims of the elite and the ultimate source of political legitimacy and good in society. The relationship between the people and the elite is not mediated through democratic procedures, deliberation and compromise. It is one of antagonism and symbolic, or even physical, violence. Populism can have a deep affinity with religion when it projects the salvation of the political community from evil as depending on sacrificial violence. 'Lock her up!' people shouted at Trump's rallies with reference to Hillary Clinton, the 'quintessence' of the 'liberal elite'.

Thirdly, the current populism is usually characterised by the presence of a charismatic or messianic leader (usually a man) claiming to express the real will of

⁷Mudde (2004).

⁸Bottici (2007).

the people. The leader is brave, sincere and able to unmask with his straight talk the elite hiding hypocritically behind the veil of political correctness. The leader is the supreme unmasker. In Europe, Matteo Salvini and Viktor Orbán are examples of such ‘honest’, strong and charismatic leaders combining populism, nationalism and—in particular, in the latter case—religion. Although the leader can be elected according to democratic procedures, the relationship with the electorate pertains not to the logic of representation through deliberation and general rules but to that of emanation. According to this logic, the leader as ‘natural’ emanation of the people has a privileged and immediate access to their interests and needs; the leader is the incarnation of the voice of the people. As such, the leader is not bound by general rules, but is a ‘trickster’ who transcends them. He places himself above democratic procedures and the basic moral norms of the interaction in the public sphere. As a corollary, the political party becomes a tool or an accessory at the service of the leader who has direct access to the masses through Twitter, Facebook or TV.

Fourthly, the populist dynamic involves a logic of intensification of antagonistic emotions. The current populism is not on a par with the ‘regular’ left- and right-wing democratic ideologies. While the populist narrative can engender ideological content, political emotions have a primordial role in populism. The populist narrative is made of words and images with a strong and immediate emotional impact, and detrimental to ideological arguments, facts and principles. Different factors contribute to this. Populism is a call to action so as to confront the traitor and the enemy. In so doing, it reduces a complex political space to a two-dimensional struggle between the good people and the evil elite or the other (for example, refugees, Muslims, feminists).

In conclusion, the current populism need not be primarily analysed either as formal ontology or ideology; instead, we should focus on political Manichean narratives, myths and antagonistic emotions. Moreover, populism is not a catch-all concept but only one facet of the ongoing conservative counterrevolution. Together with authoritarian nationalism and religious fundamentalism, populism drives a counter-revolutionary wave built on narrative, myth and antagonistic emotions. The struggle against populist, nationalist and religious-fundamentalist forces in Europe and elsewhere needs to involve not only tackling structural problems, such as growing inequalities and societal exclusion, but also combining the use of affect and argumentative discourse within a forceful narrative championed in the mass media.

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