POPULISM:
a corrective or a threat to democracy?

Essay Contest Winner

The Democratic Limits of "Anti-Populism"

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THE ESSAY AND AWARD WILL BE PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA *Constitutionalism in the Age of Populism*

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<u>**ESSAY CONTEST – "Populism – a corrective or a threat to Democracy?"**</u>

The Democratic Limits of "Anti-Populism"

On January 20th 2020, French Minister of the Environment Brune Poirson argued in an interview with *Le Figaro* that France was witnessing the rise of "green populism" (Weisfred 2020). This rather bizarre assertion was intended to denounce political activists who purportedly exploit the popular anguish caused by climate change. Poirson identified two categories of "green populists": those who use ecology to promote economic and cultural isolationism, and those who use these arguments to "break the existing system". Meanwhile, most opinion polls suggest a surge in voting intentions in favor of environmental candidates for the upcoming March municipal elections in France. Against this background, Brune Poirson's denunciation of "green populism" demonstrates that the use of the term "populism" by political actors is never neutral. Politicians who use the populist label always do so with an eye on electoral considerations, and are often trying to delegitimize oppositional forces in order to reinforce the status quo.

Beyond these obvious electoral motives, what can be noted is the rhetorical and lexical inflation in the use of the term populism in academic, media and policy circles. Who uses this label? In which contexts? What are the performative effects of using this label? Does it serve the purpose of scientifically assessing a style of political leadership or the content of specific political claims? Or is it a convenient epithet used to delegitimize a political adversary? While the democratic or undemocratic dimensions of populism have already been discussed at length, how can we assess the impact of "anti-populism" on democracy?

Since the 2008 global financial collapse and the subsequent deep sovereign debt crises and austerity measures experienced in various EU countries, the term "populism" has been widely used to account for the rise of anti-establishment movements. It has also been widely contested. Indeed, the "populist" epithet tends to amalgamate a myriad of different political tendencies, from the radical-right to the radical-left. This has led some to argue that the term has come to encompass too many political persuasions to remain analytically meaningful. An intense concept-stretching would thus be at play, especially when the term leaves academic circles to be mobilized by pundits, editorialists and (mostly centrist) politicians. In

consequence, this essay argues that there is a clear distinction to be made between the academic understanding of populism – which is not consensual but relies on a prolific and diverse literature – and the far more deficient journalistic and political conceptions of populism, that do not designate a meaningful political category but fall rather within the realm of value judgment.

This essay posits that "populism" does not constitute a threat or a corrective to democracy in and of itself. Instead, whether populist forces threaten or renew democracy eventually depends on the specific socio-cultural context in which they emerge and develop. As the first section of this essay demonstrates, populism can be seen as an ideology, as a discourse, or as a strategy, and this has implications for assessing its effects on the political system. Secondly, against widespread anguish regarding the "populist surge", this essay analyzes the democratic consequences of "anti-populism" as a political discourse, strategy, and ideology in Western European countries, and in particular in France. Referring to one's adversary as a "populist" is always pejorative and aims to discredit, neutralize and delegitimize any political claim that does not conform to the status quo. In that sense, anti-populism has detrimental effects on democracy inasmuch as it socially constructs political deviance through simplistic dichotomies and thus places considerable discursive framing limits on what is politically possible on ideological grounds. Ultimately, the populist zeitgeist leads – under the pressure of both "populist" and "anti-populist" political actors – to a symbolic weakening of traditional political cleavages and to their replacement by unhelpful, superficial binary categories such as "nationalists" *versus* "progressives".

Academic Conceptions: Ideological, Discursive and Strategic Implications

Although the academic interest for the topic developed in the 1970s, there has been a surge of publications about populism over the last two decades. As Noam Gidron and Bart Bonikowski (2013) argue, three main conceptual approaches can be delineated from the vast literature on populism in political science and sociology. The literature generally refers to populism as an *ideology*, a *discursive style*, or a *strategy*, but there is some porosity and these approaches are not mutually exclusive.

Populism can first be comprehended from an ideational perspective, as a set of interrelated ideas about the nature of politics and society. Cas Mudde, focusing on European right-wing populist parties, defines populism as a "thin-centered ideology" that "considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous 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). Following the ideational approach, populism equates to an interpretative framework characterized by an opposition between the people and the elites. In his study on Polish right-wing populism, Rafal Pankowski (2010) uses the term "mental framework", which comprises not only specific ideas related to the relationship between the people and the elites but also encompasses a certain number of cultural resources and traditions anchored in what he calls, in a very Gramscian way, the "'common sense' ordinariness" of a given population (hence the reference to Catholicism in populist stances in Poland, as "common sense ordinariness" supposes that the vast majority of Polish people are Catholics). Most importantly for our present purposes, Mudde's definition of populism as a thin-centered ideology reminds us that populism can be found across ideological cleavages, fused with either-left or right appeals. Therefore, "which ideological features attach to populism depend upon the socio-political context within which the populist actors mobilize" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012, 2). In other words, because populist ideational commitments are sparingly defined, they can be the vessels of different ideological streams.

A similar yet distinct manner of thinking about populism interprets the phenomenon as a discursive style, as a way of making claims about politics. This category of interpretation has notably been developed to account for Latin American populist movements, whose leaders mobilize a "rhetoric that constructs politics as the moral and ethical struggle between el pueblo (the people) and the oligarchy" (De la Torre 2000). Populists propose a Manichean discourse that assigns a binary moral dimension to political conflicts (Hawkins 2010). Thinking about populism as a specific style of political expression is useful because it emphasizes its "performative dimensions" and allows to reflect on "the complex relationship between style and content" (Moffitt and Tormey 2012, 394). Indeed, such constructivist frameworks of analysis pertinently underline that the essence of populism does not lie in a specific content or ideology, but rather in the idea of performance (Moffitt 2016): how the message is delivered becomes more important than the message itself. Ernesto Laclau (2005) has been very influential in shaping the discursive approach to populism: his analysis demonstrates that the "us" and the "them" at the core of populist discourse are in fact "empty signifiers" that symbolically structure the socio-political environment but ultimately can take on a varied content depending on social context. In accordance with the ideational approach, the discursive perspective does not view populism as a fixed, stabilized essence, but rather as a political discourse that is adaptable across contexts and sometimes shifting over time. Thus, the meaning ascribed to the "us" and "them" is contingent to specific national socio-political

cultures, and the degree of populism that a given political actor employs can also vary over the course of their political career.

From a more pragmatic standpoint, populism can also be analyzed as a strategy, that is, a form of mobilization and organization. Again, it is mostly in reference to the Latin American terrain that such interpretations have emerged, but they have also been applied to the European context. Indeed, surveying countries as diverse as the Netherlands and Peru, Taki S. Pappas (2012) argues that populism is successful when a certain political entrepreneur is able to polarize cleavages based on the interaction between "the people" *versus* some establishment, thus forging a mass political movement. The aim of populism as strategy is therefore to create a community of action that would foster political change. The principles of popular sovereignty and majority rule thus have the potential to mobilize vast sections of the citizenry and would signal a return to a "true" democracy led by "the people" and not by professional political elites (Canovan 2002, 25). Populist methods and strategies become part of the struggle over hegemony and power. For Chantal Mouffe, "the strategy of Left populism seeks the establishment of a new hegemonic order within the constitutional liberal-democratic framework" (2018, 45).

The rich literature on populism clearly shows that there is scientific validity to the term. However, the diversity of "populisms" (whether understood as ideology, discourse or strategy) demonstrates that its democratic or undemocratic nature is always contingent upon a specific cultural, socio-economic and political context. For Kaltwasser and Mudde (2012), populism can be both a corrective and a threat to democracy, depending on the degree of democratic consolidation of a given society, and on whether populists sit in opposition or in government. However, other interpretations of populism do not reflect the same scientific rigor, particularly when the word is employed by pundits, editorialists and political actors. Indeed, the tension between "populism" as an object of social and historical study and as a word talked about in everyday discussions is "dense and opaque" (Venizelos 2019).

The Democratic Limits of "Anti-Populism"

It seems that the "populist" characterization becomes abusive whenever the term leaves academic discussions and starts being employed by media pundits and political actors. Indeed, it is often very hard to find a common ideological denominator between the political leaders or movements that are labelled "populists" in popular media and centrist political

circles: far-right and far-left are profoundly and purposefully amalgamated, as demonstrated by the drawing below, from Plantu, which was published in *L'Express* in January 2011.

"The Rise of Neo-Populisms", Drawing from Plantu, *L'Express,* **January 19, 2011.**

No clear definition of "neo-populism" is provided by Plantu, but the drawing explicitly suggests that both Marine Le Pen's radical Right stances on immigration and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's radical Left stances against oligarchy are characterized by the same demagogic, proto-fascist (they both wear a red armband) and anti-elitist verve. It has become very commonplace for Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Marine Le Pen to be indistinctively labelled as "populists" in the French media, echoing an outdated debate on how "the extremes meet", which Nonna Mayer aptly closed (Mayer 2011). Yet, this political amalgam illustrates the purpose of "anti-populism" as a "discursive style": the label clearly serves the purpose of delineating the limits of the acceptable on ideological grounds. Labelling an adversary as "populist" is aimed at excluding, disqualifying, neutralizing and discrediting. The "populist" label, when used by "experts" and centrist politicians, virtually excludes from political "decency". Western European societies are witnessing the social construction of political deviance, as "populism" is always used in a derogatory manner: it is equated to an anomaly, to a pathology of liberal democracy. To put it bluntly, calling someone a populist neutralizes

any critique, discards any discussion, and discredits any alternative that person could offer, thus echoing the Thatcherite motto: "There Is No Alternative".

Yet, it is precisely because of the Thatcherite legacy that populism emerged. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) point out that populism disappeared almost entirely in Europe in the prosperous post World War II decades. Its re-emergence coincided with the abandonment of Keynesian economic policies, the weakening of the welfare state, and the spread of neoliberal ideas. John Judi (2016) goes further and identifies a causal relationship between the "neo-liberalization of social-democracy" and the rise of populism in Europe and in the United States. Populism is thus a reaction to neo-liberalization; it forms another manifestation of the "double-movement" that political economist Karl Polanyi identified in *The Great Transformation* (1944), when active unrest from various social groups and the establishment of protectionist institutions result from the endeavor to "disembed" the economy from society through *laissez-faire* policies (Polanyi 1944, 214). Against this background, populist movements and leaders in Europe are seen as a threat to the existing liberal order and to democracy because they criticize the status quo associated with the expansion of neoliberal measures.

However, editorialists and the "traditional" political class adopt a very minimalist, almost Schumpeterian definition of democracy based solely on (highly regulated) free speech and the right to vote, which constitute mere conditions to the maintenance of democracy. What democracy should also guarantee is pluralism within the range of policy options that are proposed to the citizenry. In the framework of the Economic and Monetary Union, the relinquishment of monetary, fiscal and budgetary sovereignty confirms that the right to vote and free speech are not enough to ensure democratic accountability. In Western Europe, the surge of populism is a reaction to this lack of pluralism, to the accelerated sell-off of critical public assets and to the dismantling of the welfare-state commended by the European Commission, following the 1992 Maastricht Treaty and its accompanying "convergence criteria" that have constitutionalized austerity on the continent. Similarly, most of the so-called populist mobilizations in South America were driven by a refusal to abide by the Washington Consensus dictates. Labelling those on the Right and the Left who criticize this state of affairs as "populist" conveniently overshadows and marginalizes their arguments. Chantal Mouffe describes a "populist moment" resulting from a growing "oligarchization" of Western European societies (2018, 17). A variety of anti-establishment movements, both from the Right and the Left, are calling into question the neoliberal hegemonic order and aim to recreate political frontiers in a context of "post-democracy" characterized by the erosion of

equality and popular sovereignty (2018, 5; 11-13). Against this growing "oligarchization", Mouffe contends that populism can in fact support inclusionary politics that expand democratic participation to previously marginalized groups.

Indeed, the populist phenomenon does not express an opposition to democracy per se, but signifies however a widespread defiance towards the principle of representation. Populists are eager to increase democratic participation through other means (local democracy, referendum, etc.). Sometimes, personalist politics take over and a shift can be observable from the "representation" to the "embodiment" of the general will by a charismatic man or woman of destiny. Nevertheless, such Caesarist postures are not exclusive to populist movements and can be found within "social-democratic" regimes as well (such as Matteo Renzi's in Italy or Emmanuel Macron's in France). In many cases, populist movements are in fact inclusionary: Latin American populists thus strive to galvanize ethnically and socioeconomically diverse constituencies (Gidron and Barnikowsky 2013, 20). The surge of populism could therefore become an opportunity for extending the definition of democracy by diversifying the forms of political action and the levels and canals of popular expression.

Finally, anti-populist rhetoric is also mobilized by political actors, especially by the centrists, who hypocritically pretend to place consensus at the core of their politics, and whose political hegemony is severely under threat. In this context, "anti-populism" becomes a "strategy" for maintaining power. What Emmanuel Macron suggests is a "return to the 1920s" (Von der Burchard 2018), is a very convenient distraction. Under the broad "populist threat" catchphrase can be classified all the actors and movements that depart from the "post-political" zeitgeist. It can thus be used by the guardians of the status quo to delegitimize whatever political forces stand against them: Matteo Renzi capitalized on it (Financial Times 2020), so did Emmanuel Macron and Justin Trudeau (Tunney 2019). In order to present all political outsiders as "dangerous", the best method consists in co-opting the very stratagems populists purportedly use at length: false dichotomies. Thus, we would be witnessing a strife between "reason" and "emotion", between "expertise" and "demagogy". The traditional distinction between Left and Right is abolished since all populists are indistinctly associated: it is replaced by a simplistic cleavage between "progressives" and "nationalists". In fact, centrists and right-wing populists are in a dialectical relationship: they co-constitute one another because they both aim to restructure the political landscape around the progressive/nationalist cleavage: the political forces standing between them are considered residual. The centrists' strategies, policies and popular support are exhausted. Their sole option left is to position "against": "it is us or the chaos", as the French presidential majority

suggested during the 2019 European elections campaign. From an electoral standpoint, Emmanuel Macron needs Marine Le Pen to survive politically in the face of popular defiance: his only hope for winning the 2022 presidential election is to confront her again on the second round. In restricting the political debate to this eerie confrontation, anti-populist politicians prove that their influence is at least as toxic for democracy than that of the populists they supposedly abhor.

In light of the journalistic and political appropriations of the term, it seems that "populism" outside of academia has been elevated at the level of what Roland Barthes (1957) called a "myth". The term "populism" becomes a mode of signification, a system of communication that semantically and symbolically exclude certain ideas from political respectability. More tacitly, it signifies that the popular classes are – unlike the technocrats – incompetent when it comes to the democratic process, and this implacable value judgment paves the way for elite domination. Indeed, anti-populism is very elitist (Venizelos 2019): it ultimately assumes that people-centric discourses and demands for popular sovereignty are irrational, chaotic, irresponsible and ignorant. In this last acceptation, technocracy is deemed superior to popular sovereignty and "anti-populism" becomes, indeed, a scornful "ideology".

To conclude, in order to avoid the moral trap of the binary "us *versus* the chaos" narrative, we should rehabilitate the role of strife in social life and envisage democratic conflict as a healthy process. More than ever, the erection of robust lines of ideological demarcation between Left and Right is necessary to develop a conflictual approach conducive to emancipatory change. One last word of caution: one should not give too much credence to the relentless struggle centrists are fighting to "protect liberal democracy". As soon as electoral or coalitional opportunities arise, they turn their vests in a typical transformist move, and associate with the "populists" they once loathed. The parliamentary alliance forged in September 2019 between the Democratic Party (Matteo Renzi's former organization) and its erstwhile enemy, the Five Star Movements, is a case in point (BBC News, 2019).

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