

Populism: What does it mean for Europe, our Societies and our Minds?
Heather Grabbe

followed by a response to the Presentation from Marat Shterin

What is populism?

According to the political theorist Margaret Canovan,
if the notion of populism did not exist, no social scientist would deliberately invent it; the term is far too ambiguous for that. (Canovan, 1981)

Nevertheless, a number of features have been identified and definitions attempted. The Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde writes:

*Populism 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.* (Mudde,2007)

Populism has been seen as a political phenomenon neither good nor bad in itself, although at the same time it has been termed "the dark side of democracy". It reflects a feeling that the elite is not working in the interests of the population. However, the "general will" of the people is a sparse definition, telling one nothing about how structures of government are to function.

Populism typically has several features. These include: scapegoating (for example of immigrants); nostalgia (every US politician has said "Let's make America great"; Trump differs in that he says "Let's make America great again"); the need to restructure politics. However, populism is a very thin ideology; it can be right-wing or left-wing; mainly it is a kind of drama. How can we recognise a populist drama? It involves three fingers of blame.

The first, pointing upwards, is at the corrupt elites, who are said to be illegitimately in power. Interestingly, this blame can operate even when a populist government is in place: a recent poster on behalf of the Hungarian (populist) *Jobbik* party against the government of the (populist) *Fidesz* party claims "you work, they steal".

The second, pointing sideways, is at the external enemy. The main enemy has historically been the Jews, who are said to have influence by means of control of international finance and conspiracy; recently the emphasis has been on the threat from immigrants, who will allegedly pose a demographic threat to the indigenous population.

The third, pointing downwards, is at the internal enemy: non-indigenous people who are already within the country and who are allegedly first in the queue for benefits such as housing and social security.

"Populism" is widely used as a term of abuse. In this presentation, however, I want to use it as a tool of analysis. In particular, I am interested in considering how digital communication and social media are changing how people think and behave.

The use and effects of social media

Populism in the twenty-first century is different from populism in earlier centuries. Populism tends to start on the margins, short of power bases and financial resources. Social media have given it a massive boost. The English Defence League worked principally through Facebook in its earliest days; the Five Star Movement in Italy has worked almost exclusively through social media and its share of the vote rose from zero to 25% in the course of one year.

Social media are changing the way people take in information and process it. The multiplication of news sources via social media has eroded trust in traditional news sources, and that erodes the power of government to tell the political story. At the same time, algorithms mean that when you use social media you will tend to be led to links to sources similar to the one you first searched; these "filter bubbles" mean that one loses a balanced perspective and the wider picture. People start to create their own news world, and this encourages the growth of conspiracy theories. Politics in cyberspace is fast and simple; it requires only a short attention span; it provides no incentive to check sources of information; and it is highly interactive. All this benefits populist movements which offer simple answers to very complex questions.

It also encourages the dissemination of misinformation. According to an MIT survey in 2018, falsehoods are 70% more likely to be retweeted on Twitter than the truth; true stories take six times longer on average to reach people than falsehoods (<http://news.mit.edu/2018/study-twitterfalse-news-travels-faster-true-stories-0308>). In the three months before the 2016 US presidential elections "fake news" stories proliferated: "Pope Francis shocks the world, endorses Donald Trump for President"; "Donald Trump sent his own plane to transport 200 stranded marines"; "WikiLeaks confirms Hillary sold weapons to ISIS"; "FBI director received millions from Clinton Foundation, his brother's law firm does Clinton's taxes"; "ISIS leader calls for American Muslim voters to support Hillary Clinton". An Ipsos Public Affairs survey in 2016 found that 75% of those who saw these headlines thought that they were "somewhat" or "very" accurate (<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/fake-newssurvey#.nw5466rdWk>). The epistemological crisis means that we are losing our bearings about truth and falsehood. Implied connections are easier to make: for

example "migrants, terrorists, Eurocrats" are all conflated and are all to blame for our misfortunes. The epistemological crisis in turn fosters a moral crisis. Relativism becomes extreme; trustworthiness becomes just one option amongst others ("alternative truths"); penalties for lies or false claims tend to disappear. President Trump doesn't need even to pretend to be telling the truth.

The effects of populism on the European Union

I now want to consider the effects of populism on the European Union (EU), first on the EU's values, and second on its working methods.

Values

The EU's values are set out in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (2007): The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.

Populism throws these values into question. Populists disagree with parts of this agenda, claiming that the values have not been debated, that the common people have no access to these values, that they are a luxury enjoyed by elites, and that they should apply only to the mainstream "native" population.

Working methods

The EU's working methods were designed to encourage trust between elites and peoples, across borders rather than within individual countries, with the aim of highlighting common humanity in solidarity. Populists, however, believe that one can only trust people who are like oneself; the populist narrative relies on exclusion, not inclusion of the "other", and emphasises identity rather than policy. Populists argue, moreover, that negotiation in the EU is between elites only, and that it also inevitably results in compromises: only zero-sum outcomes are possible.

Two kinds of populist parties

There are two kinds of populist party in the EU: those which are comfortable to stay on the fringes, and those which aim to come to power or which have recently succeeded in doing so. Examples of the first type include the Party for Freedom (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*) in the Netherlands, led by Geert Wilders; the National Rally (*Rassemblement national*, formerly the *Front national*) in France, led by Marine le Pen; and the Flemish Bloc (*Vlaamsblok*) in the Flemish-speaking half of Belgium.

Examples of the second type include *Fidesz*, in power in Hungary under the Prime

Minister Viktor Orbán; the Northern League (*Lega Nord*) in Italy, led by the Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini; the Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) in Poland; the Freedom Party of Austria (*FPÖ*); and the Slovenian Democratic Party (*Slovenska demokratska stranka*) which won the Parliamentary election on 3 June this year.

All the parties in the second category made strong claims to validity when in opposition, with rhetoric couched in general terms, but when in power have put forward very few concrete alternative policies. This seems to be characteristic of populist parties in power since, as noted above, they emphasise the importance of identity rather than of policy. "*We have replaced a shipwrecked liberal democracy with a 21st-century Christian democracy*" (Orbán); "*The only antidote to racism is to control, regulate and limit immigration*" (Salvini). "*It is absolutely clear a homosexual should not be a teacher*" (Law and Justice). "*Let us put an end to this policy of Islamisation as soon as possible*" (Freedom Party of Austria). "*Our party puts Slovenia, Slovenians first*" (Slovenian Democratic Party).

Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind (John Milton, Comus)

According to the philosopher Karl Popper,

the open society is one in which men have learned to be to some extent critical of taboos, and to base decisions on the authority of their own intelligence.(Popper, 2012)

Since the Enlightenment the notions of freewill and freedom of choice have been central to the development of democracy; but nowadays increasingly people are unable to tell truth from falsehood. As discussed earlier, social media can (unintentionally) manipulate people's minds, and hence (unintentionally) subvert democracy. As the philosopher Hannah Arendt observes,

the ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the dedicated communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction, true and false, no longer exists. (Arendt, 1973).

Some people see populism as essentially connected to religion, and even vice versa. I would warn against this conflation. Take for example the clergy and bishops of the Catholic Church in Poland, who are clearly split between conservatives and pro-EU liberals. And Pope Francis has expressed his definite opposition to all manner of populist ideas, especially on migration. I see the populists' use of religion as opportunistic: they invoke religion when it suits them, including invoking "traditional" religion in order to identify the "genuine" indigenous population of a particular country. Meanwhile religious faith can offer an individual an independent grounding for an objective assessment of political developments. Indeed, what is most important in living with resurgent populism is to maintain one's critical faculties. I would suggest a number of practical tactics:

- Check the content of "news"
- Obtain news raw, not processed, from as near to its origin as possible
- Consume news socially, discussing it widely
- Keep a varied diet of news
- Digest news slowly and mindfully.

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Response to the Presentation by Heather Grabbe

Marat Shterin

How does populism relate to religion?

I would like to respond specifically to the question of how populism relates to religion. Here a work by Rogers Brubaker provides valuable conceptual tools (Brubaker, 2017).

According to Brubaker, populism becomes a kind of religion: it sacralises a particular nation and its dominant faith as the ideal way of being. Christianity as a faith is turned into Christianity as an ideology. The type of Christianity deemed 'traditional' in any particular country will be invoked in support of, or even identified with, 'traditional' political or social arrangements. Populists in Russia, for example, maintain that Russian Orthodoxy is intrinsically supportive of autocracy and nationalism. The focus on one 'traditional' faith leads to the conceptualisation of other religions as unacceptable as harmful to the ideal political or social order. Paradoxically, however, populists sometimes identify Christianity with true liberal democracy and its values in contrast to other religions deemed to be anti-democratic (Wilders, 2012).

Prospects

It seems that populism is suddenly and unexpectedly on the rise in all parts of Europe. However, arguably populists are eventually self-limiting, or indeed self-defeating. When in opposition they will argue against the policies followed by the 'liberal elite', which they portray as illegitimately in power. When they come to power themselves, however, they are unable to form coherent policies because they tend to be opposed to policies as such.

Special issue of *Religion, State & Society*

Populism has taken us unawares, but our research on it is catching up. In this context I would like to draw attention to a special issue of *Religion, State & Society* (vol. 46 no.3, September 2018) bringing together six articles on aspects of the subject of "Religion and the Rise of Populism", with an introduction by Daniel Nilsson De Hanas and myself. This special issue will be published by Routledge as an edited volume in July 2019.

References

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