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Against a General Theory of Populism: The Case of East-Central Europe

Before expanding eastwards, the European Union established economic as well as political criteria. Countries that

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aspired to become members were supposed to converge on EU standards of all types. However, since membership materialised for a group of countries from the Baltics to the Balkans in 2004 and after, economic convergence seems to have been accompanied by political divergence. To describe these trends of political deviation, deformation or even degeneration, the word populism has been most widely used. However, this article argues that populism as an expression has been not only overused but also often unhelpful to explain political developments and causality. In the context of East-Central Europe, it is more productive to focus on economic nationalism and the revival of authoritarian traditions.

Conceptual misery: Substitution and abuse

In contemporary political (science) literature, populists are those who look at society through the dichotomy of the people and the elites. They often engage in scare-mongering and offer simplistic solutions to complex problems. Populist deviations from mainstream politics, i.e. the advocacy of a closed society as opposed to an open and liberal one, apparently represent the main dynamics of our time, and have perhaps even replaced the left-right divide. Attempting to create a general theory of populism is just one step away.

Populism studies and commentaries tend to agree that this tendency is wrong and dangerous,¹ but a convincing anti-populist strategy has not yet emerged either in Europe or in the US. The commentary that considers most – if not all – political processes of our time through the lens of populism has not brought us better understanding or strategies. The key reason for this failure might be that the generalisation of the populism theory offers a binary analysis where the reality is multidimensional.

As the scope of populism-watching has grown, what is considered populist phenomena has become rather heterogeneous. In other words, too many different things are placed into a common basket, and the boundaries of the populist label are sometimes arbitrary. In popular discourse, the confusion is also linked to the poverty of the vocabulary and forgetting about expressions like ‘demagogue’ or ‘demagoguery’. The politician who seeks support by appealing to the desires and prejudices of ordinary people rather than by using rational arguments is a demagogue. But very often in contemporary discourse, the word populist is used instead.

Social science, like all other sciences, is supposed to explore the substance below the surface of things. However, populism discourse in general is stuck on the surface, focusing on style, outlook and appearance. This is not only leading to the overuse of a concept, but also to heaping together various political qualities, e.g. the far right and the radical left, which are otherwise arch enemies of each other.

The term populism has been spreading in part for lack of a better word, but also because of the deliberate use of a euphemistic expression to truncate the debate and avoid antagonising conclusions. This caution, however, also leads to the overuse of the word populism, but con-

sequently we do not speak enough about nationalism, authoritarianism, (post- and neo-) fascism and the far right.

In essence, the conceptual misery starts with the impoverished vocabulary but it ends with the difficulty of responding to populism. If it is dangerous, one would need to be opposed. But if populism is defined as anti-elitism without a particular explanation of social structures, one would not like to be on either side, because it either means elitism, which cannot be progressive, or one would side with the ‘despicable crowds’, which is also unpalatable. The question therefore is whether the whole dichotomy can be rejected. To find out, a broader investigation of the concept and its context is needed.

Missing subjects: History and economics

Besides substitution and euphemisms, the separation of political analysis from history and economics is also a problem. The overuse of populism today also represents an abuse of a concept that is linked to a specific tendency in political history. The Populist Movement in 19th century America was a politically oriented coalition of agrarian reformers in the Middle West and South that advocated a wide range of economic and political legislation, with a culturally conservative but socially and economically progressive profile.

The other important case of calling a political tendency populist before the recent decades was Peronist Argentina,² which took inspiration from Mussolini’s Italy. Although Juan Peron did not build a fascist state, the influence is undeniable and troubling. Such connections allow populism to be used as a euphemism for fascism, or to describe a soft (less violent) form of it.

Similarities between 19th century US and 20th century Argentine populism could be explored in relation to 21st century Europe, but it only makes sense if we do not ignore the most important factor: the political economic background of the concept. In the US case, local political action groups were organised by farmers, who were discontented because of crop failures, falling prices and poor marketing and credit facilities in the American Midwest and South in the 1880s. Similarly, pre-Peronist Argentina was hit especially hard by the global Great Depression. The conservative government at the time protected the fortunes of the rich but did nothing to alleviate the suffering of the poor.

1 H. Kriesi: The Populist Challenge, in: West European Politics, Vol. 37, No. 2, 2014, pp. 361-378; P. Mair: Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy, London 2013, Verso.

2 K. Wolfenden: Perón and the People: Democracy and Authoritarianism in Juan Perón’s Argentina, in: Inquiries, Vol. 5 No. 2, 2012.

These classic examples of populism thus have very important drivers in political economy: uneven development, capitalist crises and depression, resulting in growing inequality. Exposing this dimension using either historical or contemporary examples is not easy, due to the chasm between economists and political commentators. Harvard economist Dani Rodrik is one of those investing in overcoming this divide by highlighting the abundant literature that proves the causality between trade shocks (e.g. penetration of Chinese products or the migration of industrial jobs to China) and the rise of so-called populist tendencies in both Europe and the US.³ If the factors of political economy are at least as important as cultural questions,⁴ anti-populist strategies should also reflect this: “Economic remedies to inequality and insecurity are paramount.”

‘Trump and Brexit’

Contemporary populism was seen as a disturbing, but not paramount political problem for a very long time. However, the year 2016 saw a breakthrough when, in the aftermath of the Great Recession,⁵ populism apparently moved from the fringe to the centre, thanks to the UK referendum and Trump’s victory during the US presidential elections. This shock gave rise to ‘Trump and Brexit’ as a twin concept. Those who use this formula are typically clueless about the origin of these apparently deviant tendencies.

‘Trump and Brexit’ analysts are particularly perplexed by the phenomenon that an essentially right-wing political project gains support among traditionally left wing constituencies. This, however, is not at all a new phenomenon, in the US or the UK. The working class democratic vote shifting to a Republican presidential candidate occurred in 1980, which gave rise to the expression ‘Reagan democrats’. Similarly, the failings of the Labour Party in the UK pushed some working class constituencies behind Margaret Thatcher in the late 1970s, which produced the proverbial ‘Basildon worker’.

Most importantly, in their own times, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher were often characterised as populists. In the latter case, this was linked to the concept of ‘people’s capitalism’ (e.g. creating an impression

that through spreading share ownership and privatising council houses, the gap between those who own assets and work for others can be eliminated). Thatcher’s successor, John Major, actually announced that he would strive for a ‘classless society’.

Since liberals tend to dominate populism studies in both Europe and the US, discussions under this umbrella often overlook liberal or neo-liberal populism. An example of that is when liberals (or neoliberals) complain about bureaucracy and hide their deregulatory agenda behind general, and indeed populist, criticism of detached bureaucratic elites. Ronald Reagan was an outstanding example of such deregulatory populism that presented itself as people’s liberation but essentially drove up social inequality. Trickle-down economics connects Donald Trump to the Reagan legacy in economic policy, while his amoral foreign policy finds its roots in the Nixon-Kissinger period.

The US and the UK examples of the last 40 years should also be studied to understand how the need to address economic imbalances (deficits in particular) and relative economic decline generates various forms – including economic – of nationalism. “Make America great again” is essentially a nationalist slogan and not a populist one. Similarly, the separation of the UK from mainland Europe – and eventually Brexit – has been driven by English nationalism.

There is certainly a need for clarification in both the US and the UK context. Nobel laureate Paul Krugman called for clarity regarding the political situation in the US following the terrible incident when Donald Trump and his audience called for four Congresswomen with an immigrant background to “go home”. According to Krugman: “This should be a moment of truth for anyone who describes Trump as a ‘populist’ or asserts that his support is based on ‘economic anxiety’. He’s not a populist; he’s a white supremacist. His support rests not on economic anxiety, but on racism”.⁶

Orbánism starts with Orbánomics

Before ‘Trump and Brexit’, there was Orbán. Hungary has been the laboratory, and it is often seen as a populist paradise where not only the ruling party (that has achieved three consecutive constitutional majorities) belongs to this category but also one of the main opposi-

3 D. Rodrik: What’s driving populism?, Social Europe, 23 July 2019, available at <https://www.socialeurope.eu/whats-driving-populism>.

4 B. Eichengreen: The two faces of populism, CEPR Policy Portal, 29 October 2019, available at <https://voxeu.org/article/two-faces-populism>.

5 J. Judis: The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics, Columbia Global Reports, 2016.

6 P. Krugman: Racism Comes Out of the Closet: The dog whistle days are apparently over, The New York Times, 15 July 2019, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/15/opinion/trump-twitter-racist.html>.

tion parties of the past decade, the far-right Jobbik. The Hungarian case, however, is often misdiagnosed, especially when the recent political deformation is taken out of the context of the economic and social transformation of the 1990s.

In the late 1990s, Viktor Orbán united the Hungarian right on his political economy agenda – to correct the imbalances of the economic transition to a market system, which apparently created excessive foreign ownership in Hungary. This is a long-term programme, unfinished and unfinishable, which has helped forge a commitment to the leader on the right. Originally, this was a far-right agenda, which Orbán appropriated for the centre right. Economic nationalism is a core issue for Fidesz, which in recent years has pushed back foreign ownership in various sectors. The beneficiaries of this agenda consider it more important than upholding democratic standards.

Orbán was lucky to have the general elections in 2010 when people felt the fallout from the global financial crisis of 2008-09. This was bad for incumbents everywhere but it allowed Orbán to achieve a two-thirds majority in parliament, which he used to change the constitution (not discussed or promised before the election and therefore it was not something that people expected). He started to change the rules of the game in order to eliminate the tools he had used to get into power, e.g. it became virtually impossible to run a referendum on issues upon which the government would not agree.

The European People's Party has provided cover for Orbán. Despite dismantling the rule of law in an EU member state, the EPP has protected him in order to avoid losing a member and in exchange for economic and political favours (e.g. for German businesses in Hungary like Audi, Deutsche Telekom, etc.). The German Christian Social Union (CSU), Bavarian sister party to Angela Merkel's CDU party, has played a pivotal role in whitewashing Orbán's autocratic rule and only rejected his wildest ideas such as re-introducing the death penalty or voter registration. Orbán has also pleased his German allies by championing fiscal austerity, in contrast with the previous period when Hungary struggled with excessive deficits. Pundits who thought Fidesz would mess up the populism-driven economy were proved wrong as Orbán's government turned out to be fiscally conservative (more so than during Orbán's first premiership from 1998 to 2002).

Populism theories and varieties in practice

Hungary is often mentioned first when examples of illiberalism are listed. This is, however, another trap. Speak-

ing about illiberal democracy as a problem does have added value, because it connects problematic European cases with non- or semi-European systems that are considered hybrid, i.e. most often referring to an authoritarian content with a democratic façade. On the other hand, some illiberals like Orbán can easily twist the concept and take pride in this qualification, since liberalism as a political tendency has been a minority current in Europe in the past century; being against it may not necessarily be anti-democratic, just a different form of democracy. While highly educated and politically experienced listeners would easily grasp that the illiberal state lacks checks and balances (i.e. restraints on executive power) and hence would be closer to tyranny than democracy, this derogatory content may not be obvious for all (including many of those whose rights are denied by such systems).

One could argue that illiberalism is still a better expression than populism, because if the latter means sending home the entire corrupt political elite, Orbán has strong rivals, and they are in the centre. Though Hungary watchers fail to categorise them this way, the parties that have used straight-forward anti-elitist language are *Lehet Más a Politika* (LMP), which belongs to the European Greens, and *Momentum*, which belongs to the liberals ("Renew Europe"). LMP (ten years ago) and *Momentum* (more recently) have stepped onto the stage with the intent of retiring the (corrupt) political elite. Thus, the mainstream definition of populism applies most accurately to them – without being extremist or anti-pluralist. Why exactly they have never been classified (or stigmatised) as populists is not clear. In any case, this conundrum frustrates Cas Mudde's methodology, which is based upon a sharp separation of populist and non-populist parties.⁷

These examples, together with others like Italy's *Five Star Movement* (M5S) also question Jan-Werner Müller's theory on populism. In his groundbreaking volume, Müller argues that what is at the core of populism is a rejection of pluralism.⁸ Populists will always claim that they and they alone represent the people and their true interests. Müller also suggests that if populists have enough power, they will end up creating an authoritarian state. But clearly, there are examples (*Momentum*, *M5S*, etc.) that question the direction of the causality and whether this really is an iron law.

7 See C. Mudde: *The Far Right Today*, Cambridge 2019, Polity; and C. Mudde, C.R. Kaltwasser: *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2017, Oxford University Press.

8 J.-W. Müller: *What Is Populism?*, Philadelphia PA 2016, University of Pennsylvania Press.

EU imbalances and political nationalism

The diversity of populist experience in Europe is strongly linked to economic factors appearing in the context of the EU, which is a combination of a Single Market and a Monetary Union. In the North, and in higher income countries in particular, the free movement under the Single Market rule contributed to the rise of welfare chauvinism. This is a specific form of economic nationalism that has become a significant factor mainly, though not exclusively, in richer countries, feeding on the resentment against the free movement of labour and the EU's guarantee of equal rights. In the South, which cried out for solidarity at the time of the euro crisis, the rise of populism and the overall political upheaval resulted in a crisis of governability.

The Eastern experience is different, since the basis of the deviation is the disappointment with the 1990s transition to the market economy. The gap between expectations (fast convergence to Western standards) and experience (1990s recession) was just too wide in most countries. Before political systems started to diverge, a divergent model of capitalism emerged with the dominance of transnational companies in various sectors, and the economic aspirations of the domestic middle class (in the form of widespread ownership) unfulfilled. Although the EU did not create this problem, it has not recognised it or been a partner in correcting it.

The new EU member states saw themselves more as 'rule-takers' in the EU, and therefore considered disrupting or gaming the rule-based system legitimate. The EU is also believed to be indifferent to the demographic decline that has unfolded in most countries of the East, which largely explains their reluctance towards immigrants and asylum seekers. The striking similarities between the Eastern part of Germany (AfD phenomenon) and East-Central European countries must be acknowledged.

The economic consequence of the populist (nationalist, illiberal, authoritarian) wave in East-Central Europe is likely to be a rent-seeking, parasitical model, which nevertheless leaves much of the transnational sector intact and thus points to a dual economy. This trend (and sentiment) most likely has not run its course, since the political alternatives have been weakened and the capacity to maintain a social/political base is also boosted by short-term economic success. Additionally, mainstream opponents cannot easily appeal to tradition, since it is exactly authoritarianism and nationalism that have strong roots in the region.

What role has the EU itself played in the rise of populism, and regarding the rise of Central European nationalism

and authoritarianism in particular, is therefore a relevant question. But what does this trend mean for the future of the EU is perhaps an even more important one. What seems clear is that EU institutions have failed to defend pluralism and the rule of law, while the Treaty offers Article 7 for serious breaches. Not defending the integrity of the EU budget and leaving the scope for abuse is another major issue. The oft-discussed 'rule of law conditionality' may not be a sufficient tool to correct the situation. Territorial, social and political cohesion has to be reconsidered in a broader context.

Crying wolf when seeing one

Economic and social imbalances, particularly at times of crisis, have produced nationalist sentiment, creating or boosting political forces that have been labelled populist. In today's European context, nationalism appears to be a fall-back option against the inherent imbalances and occasional failures of EU integration. Nationalism can escalate and in Europe, it always raises the risk of violence and conflict. However, lumping everything together as populist does not help us to understand the seriousness of the threats posed by extremist tendencies to democracy and the EU integration specifically.

Benjamin Moffitt rightly suggests that what is subsumed and feared under the label of the 'populist threat' to democracy in Western Europe today is less about populism than nationalism and nativism.⁹ And he is not the only one arguing for a new focus. The night before she lost her life in Lake Balaton, 90-year-old Hungarian philosopher Ágnes Heller gave a ferocious interview in which she insisted that politicians like Salvini should not be called populist but rather ethno-nationalist.

That same week, Cas Mudde tweeted: "With three of five largest democracies having a far right political leader, and left-wing populism almost irrelevant across the globe, it is high time to be more specific and accurate in our terminology. Trump is not primarily a populist, but a nativist/racist." Mudde, who in 2004 introduced the concept of the "populist zeitgeist", suggested that words matter and we need to reconsider our vocabulary together with the research agenda.¹⁰

Anti-populists in many ways wanted to be alarmist, but by using the euphemism instead of the real names, they

9 See B. Moffitt: *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, Stanford 2016, Stanford University Press; and B. Moffitt: *The Populism/Anti-Populism Divide in Western Europe*, in: *Democratic Theory*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2018, pp. 1-16.

10 C. Mudde: *The Populist Zeitgeist*, in: *Government and Opposition*, No. 39, Vol. 4, 2004, pp. 541-563.

achieve the opposite by disconnecting contemporary far-right tendencies from their historical roots and precedents. It should be noted that in the US, those who really want to be alarmist have been writing about fascism, stressing that the return to some dark chapters of history is not impossible.¹¹ And in Europe, various manifestations of nationalism represent various degrees of threat to European integration and to peace.

While there are many under the populist label who oppose EU integration one way or another, it is very important to distinguish between those who insist on going back to the national framework (mainly on the right, with or without golden age nostalgia) and those who prefer further and faster integration and solidarity (mainly on the left). On the right, we have to distinguish between Eurosceptics and Europhobes, and the existence of anti-EU (though ‘not-too-populist’) left nationalism also needs to be acknowledged.

The mainstreamist non-solution

Anti-populism draws a sharp line between those who are populist and those who are not. In the concrete European context, this approach ignores the fact that populism can be a top up tactic or ideology that runs the gamut of the political spectrum. It also creates the impression that the far right was a problem while the centre right was not and that there is no connection between far-right politics and centre-right policies.¹²

Without a proper focus, anti-populism may also lead to the false conclusion that progressives have a shared interest (or even mission) with the centre right and the neo-liberals to defend some kind of mainstream, which most often remains unspecified by populism watchers. Anti-populism thus helps turn social democrats into mainstreamists (defenders of the status *quo ex ante*) instead of encouraging them to do their job and offer an alternative to neo-liberalism and the centre right.

It is often the lack of political alternatives that fuels anti-elitism. From this point of view, populism appears to be a consequence rather than a cause. Conservative as well as progressive modernisers in the late 20th century created their own version of political crossovers that aimed at diminishing the space for alternatives. It was not the

contemporary populists, but Margaret Thatcher in the early 1980s, who became famous for saying “there is no alternative”. On the other side, progressive centrism (as presented by Clinton in the US and Blair in the UK) relied on the art of triangulation, which eventually led the social democrats to lose their character and their backbone in some instances. Contemporary social democrats are right to look for new doctrines beyond “accepting the market economy but not a market society”.

Blanket anti-populism today opens the door to Macronism (i.e. a belief that progressives are supposed to integrate into a broad, pro-European, but essentially technocratic tent, and that staving off the far right requires dropping the social agenda). However, what may be true at the tactical level may be incorrect from the strategic perspective. Centrism can be a tactic for various political tendencies. Anti-populism, on the other hand, turns mainstreamism into an ideology and promotes ignorance of the political economy (most importantly: the causes and consequences of inequality) in theory and the need for offering alternatives in practice.

One word cannot say all

While not at all irrelevant as a concept, the overuse of populism today is a sign of intellectual laziness and a substitute for proper political analysis. It has never properly been explained why nationalist, authoritarian, far right and neo-fascist tendencies should not be called nationalist, authoritarian, far-right, or neo-fascist, but populist instead.

Correcting language is key to improving theory and also practice. For rigorous political studies we need a wide vocabulary, and specific phenomena have to be called by their right names. Similarly, open (liberal) and closed (populist) cannot replace left and right; at best, it can be a second dimension to the analysis. In the EU context, including East-Central Europe, economic nationalism has to be the focus of our analysis.

Looking at the substance – and not only the style – requires deeper inquiry into historical background and economic foundations. This will also help political analysts as well as practitioners to better understand nationalist and far-right tendencies and to develop more effective strategies against right-wing extremism in the name of humanity, equality and solidarity.

11 See M. Albright: *Fascism: A Warning*, New York 2018, HarperCollins; and J. Stanley: *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*, New York 2018, Random House.

12 B. Bonikowski, D. Ziblatt: *Mainstream conservative parties paved the way for far-right nationalism*, *The Washington Post*, 2019, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/12/02/mainstream-conservative-parties-paved-way-far-right-nationalism/>.