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The poverty of anti-populism

'Populist' is overused as a concept. That's one reason why anti-populism fails to offer political alternatives

The night before she lost her life in Lake Balaton, Klubrádió broadcasted a ferocious interview with Hungary's 90 year old philosopher, Ágnes Heller. Among many other issues, Heller was asked about Europe's populists. She insisted that the question itself is wrong because these politicians should not be called populist but ethno-nationalist instead.

Just a few days earlier, Paul Krugman decided to call for clarity regarding the political situation in the US, following the terrible incident when Donald Trump and his audience called for four minority congresswomen to go back to their home countries. 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.'

And exactly the same week, Cas Mudde, the pope of populism studies, tweeted the following: '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 suggests that words matter, and we need to mind our vocabulary.

Conceptual misery: substitution and abuse

The inappropriate use of 'populist' and 'populism' did not just suddenly become a problem in 2019. And the pundits that looks at most, if not all political processes of our time through the lens of populism have not brought us closer to either a better understanding of the problems or effective anti-populist strategies. This failure suggests that too many different things are placed in one basket, and the boundaries of the group labelled as populist are sometimes arbitrary.

Populism discourse is stuck on the surface, focusing on style, outlook and appearance. This is not only leading to overuse of the concept, but also to brushing together various political qualities, e.g. the far right and the radical left – which otherwise are arch enemies.

The impoverishment of the vocabulary starts with forgetting about concepts like 'demagogue' or 'demagoguery'. The politician who seeks support by appealing to the desires and prejudices of ordinary people rather than by using rational argument is a demagogue. But very often, in contemporary discourse, the word populist is used instead.

'Populism' has been spreading partly because some did not find the right word, but also because some others deliberately chose a euphemistic expression to cut the edges of a debate and avoid arriving to antagonising conclusions. This cautious approach also leads to overuse of 'populism'. Consequently we do not speak enough about nationalism, authoritarianism, (post- and neo-) fascism and the far right.

While the misery starts with the vocabulary, it ends with the difficulty of responding to populism. If it is dangerous, we would need to oppose it. But if we define populism as anti-elitism (without a particular explanation of social structures), why is it more dangerous than elitism itself? Therefore, The question is whether the whole dichotomy can be rejected. To find out, we first need a broader investigation of the concept and its context.

Missing subjects: history and economics

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 the 19th century US 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 economically progressive profile.

The other important case of a 'populist' political tendency was Peronist Argentina, which took some inspiration from Mussolini's Italy. Although Juan Peron did not build a fascist state, the influence is undeniable. However, pre-Peronist Argentina was hit hard by the global Great Depression, and the conservative government at the time protected the fortunes of the rich but did nothing to alleviate poor people's suffering. Taking things out of context opens the door to use populism as a euphemism for fascism, or to describe a soft (pre-violent) form of it.

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It is the neglect of such historical origins that allows for populism to be the catchword for all types of extremist danger today. For example, Jan-Werner Müller argues that the core of populism is a rejection of pluralism. Populists will always claim that they and they alone represent the people and their true interests. Müller also proposes something that amounts to an iron law of populism: that if populists have enough power, they will end up creating an authoritarian state. But clearly, neither the original populists (US agrarian reformers) nor some of the contemporary representatives (e.g. M5S in Italy) are anti-pluralist or authoritarian.

On the other hand, all the classical examples of populism as well as the contemporary representatives have very important drivers in the political economy: uneven development, capitalist crises and depression that result in growing inequality. Exposing this dimension either on classical or contemporary examples is not easy, due to the chasm between economists and political commentators. Dani Rodrik is one of those investing in overcoming this divide, and highlighting the abundant literature that proves the causality between trade shocks (e.g. penetration of Chinese products) and the rise of so-called populist tendencies in both Europe and America.

If political economy is at least as important as cultural questions, anti-populist strategies also have to reflect this lesson. As Rodrik says: 'Economic remedies to inequality and insecurity are paramount.' This definitely applies to the EU today, where economic and social imbalances, in particular at times of crises, have been producing nationalist sentiment, creating or boosting political forces that have been labelled as populist.

In our European context, nationalism appears as a fall-back option against the inherent imbalances and policy failures of EU integration. For example, welfare chauvinism as a specific form of economic nationalism has become a significant factor mainly, though not exclusively in richer countries, feeding on the resentment against free movement of labour and the EU regulation that guarantees equal rights.

'Trump and Brexit'

For a long time, contemporary populism was seen as a disturbing, but not paramount political problem. The year 2016 saw the breakthrough, when

populism apparently moved from fringe to centre, and this shock gave rise to the twin concept 'Trump and Brexit' . Those who use this formula are typically clueless about the origin of these apparently deviant tendencies. It's the language of centrists who have been 'mugged by reality' and, instead of reflecting on the limitations of their centrism, double down and arrive to mainstreamist ideology.

'Trump and Brexit' centrists 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, either in the US or UK context. Working class voters shifting to a Republican presidential candidate could be observed in the US already in 1980, and to the Tories in the UK in 1979. 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).

Since liberals tend to dominate populism studies in both Europe and the US, discussions under this umbrella often overlook liberal or neo-liberal populism. Liberals (or neoliberals) for example complain about bureaucracy and hide their deregulatory agenda behind general, and indeed populistic criticism of bureaucrats. Ronald Reagan delivered a masterclass of such deregulatory populism that presented itself as people's liberation but essentially drove up social inequality.

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The US and 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 of nationalism including an economic one. 'Making America great again' is essentially a nationalist slogan and not a populist one. Similarly, the separation of the UK from mainland Europe and Brexit has been driven by English nationalism and not populism. On the other hand, one has to be alarmist when there is a reason. And in the US thosewho really want to be alarmist, have been writing about fascism and stressing that the return to some dark chapters of history is anything else than impossible.

The mainstreamist trap

Conservative as well as progressive modernisers in the late 20th century both created their own version of political crossovers that aimed at diminishing the space for alternatives. Progressive centrism relied on the art of triangulation (creating the New Left from elements of the Old Left and the New Right), which eventually helped social democrats lose their character and backbone sometimes. This created a space for them to be substituted by various other parties.

Centrism can be a tactic for various political tendencies, including social democracy. Anti-populism, however, turns mainstreamism into an ideology and promotes ignorance of political economy (most importantly: the causes and consequences of inequality) in theory and the need for offering alternatives in practice. It was not the contemporary populists, but Margaret Thatcher in the early 1980s who became famous by saying 'there is no alternative'.

Anti-populism draws a sharp line between those who are populist and those who are not. In the European context, it creates an impression as if the far right was a problem while the centre right was not, and as if there was no connection between the far-right politics and centre-right policies. It may also lead to a false conclusion that the progressives have a shared interest (or even mission) with the centre right and the neoliberals to defend some kind of mainstream, which most often remains unspecified by populism watchers.

Anti-populism thus helps turning social democrats into mainstreamists (defenders of the *status quo ex ante*), instead of encouraging them to do their job and offer an alternative to neoliberalism and the centre-right. At a practical political level, it opens the door to Macronism (i.e. a belief that progressives are supposed to integrate into the broad, pro-European, but essentially technocratic and elitist tent of Macron, and that staving off the far right requires dropping the social agenda).

Mainstreamism has therefore created a synonym for 'populist', that is 'illiberal'. This does have added value because it connects problematic European cases with non- or semi-European systems that are considered hybrid, which most often means 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. So being against it may not necessarily be anti-democratic, just a different form of democracy.

One word cannot say all

While not at all irrelevant as a concept, the overuse of 'populism' today appears as a sign of intellectual laziness. For rigorous political analysis, we need a wider vocabulary, and specific phenomena have to be called by their right names. It has never been properly explained why nationalist, authoritarian, far right and neo-fascist tendencies should not be called nationalist, authoritarian, far right, or neo-fascist, but populist instead.

In a European context, it is important to distinguish between those who insist on going back to the national framework (mainly on the right), and those who prefer further and faster integration and solidarity as a solution (mainly on the left). On the right, we have to distinguish between Eurosceptics and Europhobes, and the existence of anti-EU, left nationalism also has to be acknowledged.

Nationalism can escalate, and this always raises the risk of violence and conflict. However, lumping everything together as 'populist' does not help us understanding the seriousness of the threats to democracy and human rights. Anti-populists often want to be alarmist, but by using the euphemism instead of the real names they reach the opposite effect by disconnecting contemporary far-right tendencies from their roots.

Looking at substance and not only style requires attention to historical background and economic foundations. Less morphology and more political economy will help progressives to better analyse nationalist and far-right tendencies and to develop more effective strategies against right-wing extremism in the name of humanity, equality and solidarity.



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