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Why the term ‘populism’ is harmful

‘Populism’ is being defined far too simplistically. This is not just an academic lapse, but a tangible problem for democracy and political discourse

The populist is the yeti of political debate — everyone talks about him, but no one has really seen him. For some, a populist is someone who is against elites and the establishment. In this case, the populist defines themselves as a representative of the true will of the people — and thus against a corrupt elite. For others, populism is primarily a polarising, emotional and simplistic style of communication or simply an ideology without a substantive core. For many, political movements tailored to one leader are another trait of populism.

These attempts at definition have one thing in common: they say practically nothing. If they were correct, then almost all politicians would be populists. Criticism of elites is part of democracy. Claiming to represent the interests of the people is part of the standard repertoire of political debate. Simplification is a necessary stylistic device in order to present complex issues for public discussion. Emotions are just as much a part of politics as rational argumentation. However, the arbitrariness of the term populism is not just an academic lapse, but a tangible problem for democracy as well as political discourse. Even though this yeti does not exist, it is still doing serious damage.

The term populism disguises attacks on democracy. In the case of Donald Trump, considered the prototype of a populist, it is not so much of a problem that he simplifies or portrays himself as a representative of the silent majority or polarises. The problem is that he attacks democracy. He does not recognise the results of democratic elections, discredits the media, denigrates the courts and belittles minorities. These are frontal attacks on the core of US democracy, but they blur behind Trump’s classification as a populist. The term ‘populist’ suggests that Trump is doing something popular or close to the people – not something anti-democratic.

The term populism not

The situation is similar with Viktor Orbán – another textbook populist. Here, too, the lesser

only trivialises attacks on democracy, however; it also divides and thus weakens democracy.

problem is that he portrays himself as a defender of Hungary, its culture, beliefs and traditions. The real problem is that he undermines democratic elections, denies the opposition equal opportunities, abuses referendums for his own purposes, restricts the scope of civil society and undermines the independence of the judiciary.

The term populism not only trivialises attacks on democracy, but also divides and thus weakens democracy. It is the main purpose of the populism accusation to discredit the other side; devalue it as non-scientific, susceptible to simple messages, undemocratic or somehow distasteful. It suggests an opposition between the reasonable and liberal part of society, and a frustrated, emotionalised part. This 'axis of populism and anti-populism' is now one of the major dividing lines in western democracies.

A paternalistic approach to politics

Ironically, the liberal part of the political spectrum also cultivates this dividing line. The term populism is widely used here. Common reactions to populism are phrases like 'citizens need to be redirected' and 'their fears and concerns need to be taken seriously' – which usually includes the unspoken subtext that these concerns are actually unfounded or even misguided. This pedagogical approach to politics does not build bridges, but rather divides.

Another form of this paternalism are political strategies that are tailored to respond to populist challenges. With their pedagogical view of fellow citizens, they too deepen dividing lines and make open debates at eye level more difficult. They invite people to talk *about* the other side, rather than *with* the other side. In doing so, they are helping those, out of all people, who avoid an open factual debate and live off the shrill contrasts of the populism debate.

Another problem with the concept of populism is that it lumps together very different groups under a single banner. Parties as diverse as, for example, the FPÖ in Austria, the AfD in Germany, PiS in Poland, Greece's Syriza and the Italian five-star movement, are all labelled populists. If establishment-busting defines a populist, then Macron would be one of the most successful of his generation because of the way he has shaken up the French party landscape. But if populists are lurking almost everywhere, then democracy appears to be under attack from all sides in a vague sort of way. This unsettles people and makes them

disoriented.

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Finally, populism undermines a pillar of democracy: pluralism. The term populism suggests that a certain opinion lies outside the democratic spectrum. Democracy, however, comprises a large tent in which there is room for a great many opinions. Only extremist positions, such as hate speech against minorities or rejection of democratic institutions, are undemocratic and therefore outside the tent. National laws, international law and resolutions of the UN General Assembly define the limits of the democratic spectrum in a fairly reliable way. In its sweeping generality and vague nature, however, the accusation of populism goes far beyond these boundaries. In doing so, it narrows the spectrum of permissible democratic opinions and undermines pluralism.

However, the term populism is not only harmful, but also superfluous. There are more precise and politically more effective terms for the characteristics that populists are accused of. *Antipluralism*, for instance, is a far better term when it comes to describing the claim to sole representation of the will of the people. *Völkisch* (ethnonationalist) and *identitarian* are the correct terms when it comes to a supposedly homogeneous national body. *Authoritarian* fits better when criticising the leadership cult of a movement.

The many problems with the concept of populism have been described, but consequences are rarely drawn from these insights. The term continues to be used, hence the problem remains unresolved. The only thing that would help is to stop using the term in political debate. Thus populism should become the P-word of political discourse. *Harry Potter* readers would say that the P-word is the term that 'must not be named'. In the political debate, a clearer distinction must be made between those opinions that are not politically shared and those that are undemocratic.



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