

What About Populism? Is the Populism a “Thin” Ideology or a Neutral Political Instrument?

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Abstract

In the last years, the populism has become a very popular concept. So, popular that it becomes difficult to explain. Sometimes populism is used to describe radically different speeches. In Europe, the politicians from all the parties had adopted populist tactics by branding their opponents as tools of the “establishment”. In the Central and Eastern Europe, the populism was adapted at the historical traditions of each society and made a natural junction with iliberalismul that now gives an ideological universal sense. This is the reason because it was quite natural that populism from Eastern Europe takes an illiberal turn and no an openly fascist orientation.

Populism: a variable geometry concept

We hear a lot about populism these times. In United State during 2016 primaries both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump have been qualified as populists. And they still seemed so different! And in Europe the politicians from all the parties had already adopted populist tactics by branding their opponents as tools of the “establishment”. Everything seems to show that “populism” has become the dominant political trend of this apparent end of the economic crisis. But this crisis after crisis it is itself a symptom of the crisis. So, what is this populism? There is no easy answer because apparently “populism” describes a political style more than a specific set of ideas or policies, and most commentators and politicians call the others “populist” instead of themselves. The main difficulties with populism, as explained Ghi?a Ionescu and Ernst Gellner in their classical book *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics* it’s because “the populism worships the people” [1, pp. 4] and is to identify the variety of political movements associate with this phenomenon.¹

The populism as concept and as political action has been described as a political or psychological pathology [2], as a social and political style [3], as a political ideology [4] or a political mood [5].

Some authors have raised doubts as populism has any analytical utility, concluding that it is too vague to offer scientific explanations about politics². In the theoretical literature, it is argued that populism should be regarded as a ‘thin’ ideology which, although of limited analytical use on its own terms, nevertheless conveys a distinct set of ideas about the political which interact with the established ideational traditions of full ideologies. But for some authors the populism is just a neutral notion. In an interview for the French newspaper *Le Monde* from 9 February 2012 Ernesto Laclau explains: «“Populism” is not a pejorative term for me, but a neutral notion. This word has now become a foil, much like “democracy” in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Democracy was, in the eyes of the settled people, the return of Jacobinism and the government of the plebs. Populism is a way to building politics. It plays the basis against the summit, the people against the elites, the masses mobilized against the frozen official institutions. Mussolini and Mao were populists. Just like Viktor Orban and Hugo Chavez, Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon are today” ». For the author of this article the populism is a vehicle that adapts to the historical, social, economic and political context of a state and which can evolve to the extreme when it is used to promote social and political hatred. And here the class hatred combines with the race or the gender hatred can be resources for the populist promotion of the extremism. But if populism accentuates them, he does not give them consistence. These political trends pre-existed already.

Populism: a historical phenomenon

That populism can by a “thin” ideology is proved by the first known populism in history. The *populares* or *popularis* formed a the first *populist* political movement known in history which marked the last period of the Roman Republic, especially in the 2nd century BC. Generally, this political movement was relying on the revedication of the popular classes from the Roman society. But the ambiguity of the *popularis* comes from the meaning of the word in self which can mean “pleasing the populace” or “in the interests of the populace” [6, pp. 51]. And Nicola Mackie identified that *populares* was most efficient in times of economic strife, implying that they relied upon stress as a catalyst for the success of their legislation. *Populares* also, more or less successful, proposed to extend (or redress senatorial encroachments on) the rights and powers of the Roman populace [6, pp. 65]. This political movement was not a political orientation in the modern sense, but a major cleavage in the political and social struggles of the Romans, enabling political actors to confront the conservatism of *optimates*. Richard Alston consider the idea about o significant ideological division between *populares* and *optimates* a characteristic of the nineteenth century and referring to consider this opposition like o dispute like an equivalent to “democrats” and “aristocrats” [7, pp. 353] and Margaret Robb considered that the *populares* were not a outside voice [8, pp. 14]. But anyway, this opposition would be seen this opposition we find that between the two orientations there is a genuine social and political tension. And the main demands supported by the *populares* like *agrarian reform* or *abolition or reduction of debts of poor citizens* will find permanently over the 2200 years that have passed.

Launched by reformist aristocrats like the Gracchi brothers, who gained the support of the rising class of knights [9, pp. 20], the movement evolved towards *demagogy* and *populism*³, and was recovered by ambitious people such as Marius, Cinna, Catiline or agitators like *tribunes* Saturninus and Clodius (he changes his name form Claudius to more popular Clodius) Pulcher [9, pp. 51]. From the beginning the *populares* was in opposition’s, even inside the Republic and Roman democracy, whit the *optimates*: the

conservative political movement that marked the last century of the Roman Republic by its opposition to this early “populist” movement. There were three characteristics of populism as it is today: a mobilization of popular classes against elite⁴, an appeal to the public space (*ager publicus*) as a natural space for social and economic development, and the instrumentalization of the fight against corruption of the upper classes. And this particular moment of the Roman history remained a symbolic time in the narrative of the yesterday or today Republicanism.

However, today in certain classifications of populism, as does Margaret Canovan in her *Populism* from 1981 we speak about Agrarian Populism and Political Populism, or Protest Populism and Identity Populism and that concepts may well explain the emergence of populism in the late Roman Republic [10, pp. 98].

The first modern populism was an American political experience. In the Francis Fukuyama article from 2013, *Democracy and the Quality of the State*, he defines like populist the seventh president of US, Andrew Jackson. Or, the U.S. patronage or “spoils” system blossomed after the election of 1828 that brought to power the populist Andrew Jackson. As president, Jackson declared that since he had won the election, he had the right to appoint officials to posts in the government; he added that there were few if any jobs in public administration that could not be performed by any ordinary American. [11, pp. 11]. The revolt against the first party system took less than a generation to assemble: already in 1816 Andrew Jackson (then the victorious general of the War of 1812) wrote that “Now it is the time to exterminate the monster called party spirit” – of course in the name of a return to the “original spirit” of the nation and in “the real interest” of the people. This was the beginning of what came to be known as the Second Party System, or Jacksonian Democracy, with the enlargement of the franchise, the election of judges and candidates to public office and other forms so called forms of direct democracy. [12, pp. 270], this is the context describe as late as 1835 by Alexis de Tocqueville in *De la démocratie en Amérique* (From Democracy to America): “Les partis sont un mal inhérent aux gouvernements libres mais ils n’ont pas dans tous les temps le même caractère et les mêmes instincts”. (The parties are an inherent evil of the free governments but they do not have the same character and the same instincts in all periods of time) [13, pp. II-3].

In the 1960s and 1970s, a historiographic rehabilitation of late nineteenth-century American populism helped correct the anti-populist view of populism: after Norman Pollack⁵, Lawrence Goodwyn⁶ established that in the United States, far from being a movement of extreme right protofascist and anti-semitic, the populist movement was democratic, reformist and “progressive” orientation. Goodwyn sees Populism as a movement of democratic promise.⁷ This is the populist legacy that Donald Trump claims. But in Trump’s populism there are many other American political traditions coming from the isolationist extremism from interwar period or from the racism and sexism.

The characteristics of populism

“We must be clear on the muddled issue of growing hostility toward elites, beginning with distinguishing the revolt of “those from below” (the new “plebs”) against the ruling elites (those of both political power and wealth), challenging the established elites by the rising elites and the global rejection of the “system,” considered locked, by a trans-classist mass that can be called “the people” (not the “plebs” but the modern equivalent of “*populus romanus*,” meaning, people as a whole). In all three cases, the ruling passion of the revolt or protest is mistrust that propels the loss of left–right division, to the great despair of professional diagnosticians, who, like uninspired and shortsighted oracles, are able to speak only the language of diagnostics. Moreover, the lack of confidence also affects relationships between ordinary citizens. In

fragmented contemporary communities, interpersonal trust, which is a prerequisite for all social living, has also grown community-centered.”⁸ As a modern political ideology, the populism has been conceptualized with three sub-dimensions: *anti-elite and anti-establishment attitudes*, a preference for *popular sovereignty*, and a *belief in the homogeneous virtuousness of the people*. But finally, populism reflects one of the vital tensions at the heart of the democratic regime – between the principle of popular sovereignty and the liberal principle. [16, pp. 2]. But the Populism is not necessarily incompatible with liberalism in all events as far as its economic component and its “neo-liberal” variation are concerned.

In 2013 *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser deal with the ideological dimension of the populism. According to this minimal concept, populism is defined as a *thin-centered ideology*, which is based not only on the Manichean distinction between ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, but also on the defense of *popular sovereignty* at any cost.

The chapter also examines the most common subtypes of populism and sheds light on current examples of populism in North and South America as well as in Eastern and Western Europe. Lastly, the article discusses the complex relationship that populism maintains with democracy, nationalism, and gender [17].

But if in the past Populism was utilized to venerate the “people”, in our times this term is utilized to stigmatize it. Current uses of the notion to define extremist trends as in expressions such “populism of the National Front” in France, “the populism of Geert Wilders” in Nederland’s or “populism of the brexiteers” in UK give testimony to this change. Or, the main idea of this vision about populism is that the main constituencies of these trends are the expression of the “lower classes”. This kind of hypothesis has an important analytical cost because it suggests that the interpretation of the electoral success of the extremist movements is presupposed unavoidable. Thence, nothing about the social and political elite’s role in the success of these political movements. Moreover, putting the blame of the renewal of hatred-prone “populism” on people’s politics is a way to dangerously shift the perspective on the social history of the process of the building of modern democracies by erasing the role played by people’s mobilizations.

According to Laclau, populism corresponds to a particular configuration of societies, from “logic of difference” to “relationships of equivalence between situations” [18, pp. 12]. In normal times, the different social sectors interact with the State with specific demands on them but when the power does not (or can not) respond to these various interpellations – without any necessary relationship with one another – it happens that “a set of particularities establish relations of equivalence among themselves” [19, pp. XIII]. When the Third Estate (le Tiers état) entered the political arena at the time of the French Revolution, for example, it did not merely demand a place in the existing order: it disrupted it and presented itself as the true depositary of national legitimacy. From the perspective of Laclau, he would then speak in the name of the whole society, and no longer only in the name of those had he directly represented.

The theoretical success of Populism was in direct or indirect reference to the mobilizations and “national-populist” regimes of Latin America – from the 1930s to the 1950s – described by their opponents and then conceptualized by certain sociologists like Gino Germani with his *Authoritarianism, Fascism, and National Populism* published in 1979. If today the category of “populism” has negative connotations (authoritarianism, nationalism, paternalism, demagoguery) it’s because this was the perspective of the first analysts of the phenomena in Latin America. The title of the fourth chapter of Germani’s book, *Lower-class Authoritarianism and National Populism* is significant and untestable. In the 1950s, when Germani materializes his theory of national-populism, “populism” refers mainly to regimes ruled by charismatic leaders such as Juan Domingo Perón (Argentina) or Getúlio Vargas (Brazil). In the 1960s and 1970s, many leaders of the Third World were characterized as “populists”, given their discourse no less

than their style of exercise of power or the mode of legitimization of it. Nasserism was approached as a variety of populism specified by a reformist orientation, the charisma of the leader, the symbolic exploitation of an identity myth (the Arab identity) and a military regime. Some observers have insisted on the affinities of Castroism with protofascism and Peronism and James Gregor consider the populism more relevant for the Third World politics than Marxism. [20, pp. 23].

In the collective work, *Populism. Its Meanings and National Characteristics*, published in 1969 under the co-direction of Ghi?a Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, populism was finally taken seriously by political science, sociology and anthropology. It was the subject of a wide range of analyzes, but at the same time showed the importance of the phenomenon (doctrine and movement) and highlighted the relative obscurity of its concept. At first glance, an approach to populism in terms of political psychology makes it possible to identify a central element common to all its definitions: the conviction that a conspiracy against the “people” (defined in various ways) is organized by “foreign”. Populism thus appears as an “anti-ism”, an ideological “negativism”: anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-urban, anti-Semitic, xenophobic, etc. This negative representation of populism amounts to reducing it to the vision of the conspiracy, to attribute to it the “theorem of occult forces” of which speaks Sergio Romano quoted by Pierre-Andre Taguieff [21, pp 18] or denouncing in him

a “paranoid style” [22]. This “liberal” perspective of populism has set up an anti-populist vulgate.

In relation to the overabundance of the present times about populism we can distinguish between some categories such *reactionary populism* (combined with anti-liberal conservatism) or a *progressive populism* (combined with socialism or so called progressive movements). And, as always populism was the vehicle a something else we could identify in Europe other two forms of populism, to *National Populism* and the *Christian Populism*. For example, the contemporary French populism, in its National Front version, appears as a mixture of *Bonapartism* with *reactionary populism*.

It can be hypothesized that in most post-communist East European countries is new a cleavage between *national-communist* and *traditional nationalists* but also between *neo-populist* (on ethnic or religious grounds) and a paradoxical “communist-capitalism” pro-West orientation (ex-communists advocating for liberal capitalism and integration in the Europe). This syncretism of neo-communism, traditional nationalism and populism, create a movement opposed to liberal currents or to the social democracies.

Populism and illiberalism

In Hungary after 2010 legislative elections or in Poland after 2015 elections, not to mention the already classic models such as Russia – especially after 1999 or Turkey after 2003 – the illiberalism becomes an official ideology and is growing. And, after parliamentary elections in Romania in December 2016 the illiberalism seems to be the unofficial ideology of the new “regime”, because the compatibility with the liberal democracy became inappropriate from the moment when the human rights and civil liberties (i.e. the constitutional tradition of the rule of law and democracy) are attacked.

But what is this so called illiberalism? „What we think of as democracy in the modern world is really the fusing of two different traditions. One is, of course, public participation in selecting leaders. *But there is a much older tradition in Western politics* older tradition in Western politics that, since the Magna Carta in 1215, has centered on the rights of individuals – against arbitrary arrest, religious conversion, censorship of thought. *These individual freedoms (of speech, belief, property ownership and dissent) were eventually protected, not just from the abuse of a tyrant but also from democratic majorities.* The Bill of Rights, *after all, is a list of things that majorities cannot do.*”⁹

The populism can be compatible with democracy until it is become – in the sense of the old classifications

of Aristotle – a degenerate regime. For Aristotle a degenerated political regime exists if not follow the public interest, but just the private or group interests. This is the case of the monarchy that “degenerate” into dictatorship or of the republic that “degenerate” into democracy. If populism is not compatible with liberal democracy and the nationalism, redundant and a little dusty, it’s not a sufficient political and ideological vehicle the illiberalism has emerged as an ideological justification to legitimize new forms of strong hand regime.

But what is illiberalism? In his founding article from 1997 Fareed Zakaria explains his definition of illiberal democracies: “From Peru to the Philippines, we see the rise of a disturbing phenomenon: illiberal democracy. It has been difficult to recognize because for the last century in the West, democracy – free and fair elections – has gone hand in hand with constitutional liberalism – the rule of law and basic human rights. But in the rest of the world, these two concepts are coming apart.

Democracy without constitutional liberalism is producing centralized regimes, the erosion of liberty, ethnic competition, conflict, and war.” [23]. And after his discourse at Tusnad in 2014 Viktor Orbán transforms this concept’s in an ideological justification of his political perspective.

But can by illiberalism a viable concept? We have the answer of Zakaria in 2003, five years after his 1997 article: “A lot of people thought I was being too tough on [Russian President Boris] Yeltsin, but I think the subsequent two or three years have borne out my analysis very well. Yeltsin moved in an even more authoritarian direction by the end of his presidency, and instituted in effect what Richard Pipes has called a coup d’etat by resigning six months before his term was due to end, installing Vladimir Putin as president” [24]. And we know today, in 2016: Putinism is, due to its resistance in time, a model to follow for many so called illiberal leaders from Viktor *Orbán* to Donald Trump, but even by the so anti-Russian Jarosław *Kaczyński*.

It was quite natural that populism from Eastern Europe takes an illiberal turn and not an openly fascist orientation. On the one hand, the appeal to democracy were still required for various reasons, like the adhesion to the European Union with its Amsterdam criteria, to the assertion of popular sovereignty by voting “democratic”, on the other hand, liberalism with its moral demands and individual freedoms could not be associated with populists ambitious leaders (Vladimir Putin, Recep Erdogan, Viktor Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński) willing to stay in power indefinitely. Because that, East European Populism was adapted at the historical traditions of each society and made a natural junction with illiberalism that now gives an ideological universal sense.

Form national-communism to European-illiberalism mixed with national-populism

These illiberal trends, generally and openly facing the principles and practices of human rights and civil freedoms are not so brand-new in Romania. The Romanian post-revolutionary national- populism took over the National-Communism of Ceaușescu who was the official ideology of the late two decades of communist regime in Romania. And this national-populism characterized the presidential mandates from 90’s Ion Iliescu presidency and the Traian Băsescu mandates from 2004 to 2014. These terms meant 20 of the 28 years since the 1989 Revolution. These terms improve the traditional Romanian antiparliamentary Bonapartism from the nineteenth century and the interwar era with a kind of national-communist conservatism continued and amplified by Traian Băsescu populism inspired by the Carlism and the Cult of Marshall Antonescu. Or, after 2015, favorable regional and global contexts have created the conditions for falsification of the Romanian public debate in one an illiberal direction. So were infiltrate the illiberal themes (right of parents to raise their children as they wish, hold up by the “Botnariu family scandal”

covered the sentencing of children's rights, described as an abuse of Liberals Westerners and opening the debate on the definition of family, to ban the gay marriage and, in a country where thousands of women died from abortions during the Ceaușescu regime, to move to the upper phase of campaigns for life to ban abortion and a woman's right to choose) created the conditions for transition to political illiberalism. In the post-communist world the national-communist political tribe was at first the most heavily displayed: in the Federal Republic of Serbia, with Slobodan Milošević, elected in 1989, in Romania, with Ion Iliescu, who runs the country from December 1989 to 1996 and to 2000 to 2004, in Lithuania, with the election of Algirdas Brazauskas as President in 1993; in Slovakia, with Vladimír Mečiar, Prime Minister three times in the 1990s, in Belarus, with Alexander Lukashenko, elected president in July 1994 and who remained in office since today. As can be seen from the examples above the National-populism has been strongly associated with a tendency of personalization of political life that affected the capacity of institutionalizing the new political regimes. But not all the national-populist parties are associated with the neo-Communists. And Fidesz of Viktor Orbán is a good example of a populist national party that did not take over the previous nationalist-communist tendencies. Maybe because in Hungary there was no such national-communist tradition. And the case of Orbán Hungary is, perhaps, an example of so called „populist democracy”¹⁰ [25, pp. 1]. Contrary, the pole of post-communist capitalism is illustrated by Hungary with Gyula Horn, Prime Minister from 1994 to 1998, and Poland with Aleksander Kwasniewski, President from 1995 to 2005. And, in this particularity could be found an explanation of emerging illiberalism in these countries. But, what can be observed here is the importance of a historical tradition developed at the meeting point of anti-communism (in Orbán Hungary, but also in Romania with this so called *societal Coalition for the Family*), nationalism, anti-Europeanism and traditionalist conservatism.

The Ceaușescu national-communism was a vehicle easily converted to national-populism, which was added lately a tendency rooted from Christian-populist *legionarism* inflamed by the highly orthodox fundamentalism of some monasteries with great influence on believers from mount Athos (probably under the clout of Moscow orthodoxism). If the three essential characteristics of populism as it existed before – an attempt to mobilize the “popular” classes against elites, recourse to public space as a natural space for development of the “people” and the fight against corruption of the upper classes (sells by Soros and multinationals) – was no need for an ideological bond – the illiberalism still nameless, but applied, justifies a new anti-European direction of the politicians. And the populism was the political agent to give voice to this particular illiberalism. Many illiberal beliefs are related by some national or local elected people to decrease the pressure on corruption and contraction the rule of law system. And they claiming the absolute supremacy of popular sovereignty expressed through the popular vote to achieve their goals. But this is not an ideology, but a mechanism used to reach the power. And the tendency to transfigure this cardboard post-democracy into a “populist democracy” in which all political forces are obliged to use the same methods is increased.

1 “There can, at present, be no doubt about the *importance* of populism. But no one is quite clear just what it *is*. As a doctrine or as a movement, it is elusive and protean. It bobs up everywhere, but in many and contradictory shapes. Does it have any underlying unity? Or does one name cover a multitude of unconnected tendencies? [1, pp. 1]

2 “Populism’ is a notoriously vague term”. [5, pp. 2]

3 “The Gracchans were rather disparagingly described by their opponents as *populares* (‘mob-panderers’), a term referring to their practice of promoting their cause through the manipulation of the popular institutions and at the expense of the senate” [9, pp. 27].

4 “Populism in modern democratic societies is best seen as an appeal to ‘the people’ against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society” [5, pp. 3].

5 “*The grass-roots world of Populism* is thereby opened, revealing what for me was exciting dimension. A kind of folk- wisdom emerges which grasps complex philosophical questions and pierces to their heart with deceptively simple solutions. The reason behind this, while perhaps mystifying to the intellectual, is not hard to seek. Populists lived these problems, drawing their answers from experience itself; nor were these trivial questions. As will become clear Populism formulated an extraordinary penetrating critique industrial of society. [14, pp. 9]

6 “The meaning of agrarian revolt was its cultural assertion as a people’s movement of mass democratic aspiration. Its animating essence pulsed at every level of the ambitious structure of cooperation: in the earnest probings of people bent on discovering a way to free themselves from the killing grip of the credit system.” [14, pp. 9]

7 “Populism in America was not the Subtreasury plan, not the greenback heritage, not the Omaha platform. It was not at bottom even the People’s Party. The meaning of agrarian revolt was its cultural assertion as a people’s movement of mass democratic aspiration.” [15, pp. 294]

8 Taguieff, P.-A. (2016). *The Revolt against the Elites, or the New Populist Wave: An Interview with journalist Alexis Franco for the site Atlantico*, June 12, 2016, <http://www.telospress.com/the-revolt-against-the-elites-or-the-new-populist-wave-an-interview/>, accessed on April 2017.

9 Fared Zakaria, *America’s democracy has become illiberal*. in *The Washington Post*, December 29, 2016. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/america-is-becoming-a-land-of-less-liberty/2016/12/29/2a91744c-ce09-11e6-a747-d03044780a02_story.html?utm_term=.fed508324a01, accessed April 2017.

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