Three challenges in contemporary populism research

Populism has become one of the most hotly debated topics in European politics, but how should academics seek to study it? **Yannis Stavrakakis** *identifies three key challenges in contemporary populism research: the need for critical reflexivity, the use of minimal definitions, and the difficulty in capturing and accounting for different types or degrees of populism.*

Today populism seems to be firmly back on the agenda. A series of recent events have shocked and scandalised our global public spheres, causing concern for the future of democracy and puzzling academics, journalists and citizens alike. The Italian and Brexit referendums and, in a more pronounced way, the victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election, as well as that of Victor Orban's Fidesz in the recent Hungarian elections, constitute only the most recent examples in a long chain that have elevated 'populism' to the status of one of the most hotly debated topics in contemporary politics and academia.

What has thus emerged is significant new research material and a new impetus to the scope and impact of populism research, especially as far as the relation between populism and democracy is concerned. However, major challenges have also been created, requiring urgent attention. In what follows I identify three such challenges (reflexivity, definition, typology).

Challenge 1: Critical reflexivity

A multitude of heterogeneous and even antithetical phenomena are currently being debated under the rubric of populism: from the European far right in – among other countries – France, Austria and the Netherlands, and illiberal governments in Hungary and Poland, on the one hand, to Bernie Sanders, the so-called 'pink tide' of left-wing populist governments in Latin America, and inclusionary populisms in the European South triggered by the brutal ordoliberal management of the European crisis, on the other.

Very often the movements, parties, leaders and discourses under examination seem to have nothing or very little in common as they range from the radical left to the radical right end of the political spectrum and from egalitarian to authoritarian orientations. Yet, one thing is obviously certain. They seem to cause surprise. Mainstream media, established political forces and academics are quick to denounce their scandalous nature: all of a sudden, the unthinkable seems to be happening. Populism is seen as violating or transgressing an established order of how politics is *properly*, *rationally* and *professionally* done. It emerges *where* it should not *when* it should not; it disrupts a supposed "normal" course of events and can only be seen as a signal of failure.

This understanding of "populism" as an incarnation of whatever violates the (naturalised) established order of things has been shared by political and academic elites and popularised through mainstream media since the 1950s. During this period, commencing with the publication of the true diachronic matrix of academic anti-populism, namely Richard Hofstadter's revisionist attack on the US People's Party, *normality* was generally embodied by a unidirectional, universal *modernisation* process; populism, by contrast, was often seen as an indication of "asynchronism", of its local exceptions/failures.

In particular, it was denounced as an *abnormal* political formation articulated by *abnormal* leaders – "agitators with paranoid tendencies" in Hofstadter's words – and addressed to *abnormal* constituencies, "to the disgruntled and the psychologically homeless, to the personal failures, the socially isolated, the economically insecure, the uneducated, unsophisticated, and authoritarian persons at every level of the society".

Notwithstanding the demolition of Hofstadter's impressionistic account by an avalanche of critical literature, the self-confessed bias of his approach, and the overall collapse of normative modernisation theories by the early 1970s, these bizarre ideas – equating all radical movements with irrational tendencies, abnormal subjects and political formations, and naturalising the myth of the populist monster, to put it in Barthean terms – have, since then, reemerged with a vengeance.

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In this sense, the first fundamental challenge populism research is facing today is a self-critical one: the need to seriously reflect on the language games developed around the ideological uses of "populism" within academic and media discourse from Richard Hofstadter, from the 1950s, to the present day. When we study populism, we *talk* about populism, we articulate meanings in *language* and *discourse*, and language is never innocent. In the long run it naturalises significations that were initially partisan, even arbitrary, and reifies into supposedly neutral objectivity crystallisations of historically-dependent power relations.

Challenge 2: Minimal definition

Within the broader context of the ongoing struggle between populist and anti-populist orientations, we can understand populism primarily as a specific type of discourse which claims to express popular interests and to represent associated identities and demands (the "will of the people") against an "establishment" or elite, which is seen as undermining them and forestalling their satisfaction. Accordingly, populist discursive representations typically articulate a polarised, antagonistic *framing* of the socio-political field in a bid to inspire and mobilise frustrated/excluded social groups.

The latter are called to establish links of unity, which will enable them to effectively challenge the established power structure and influence decision-making. In this sense, the main criteria highlighted by a discursive approach to facilitate a minimal definition comprise: (a) *People-centrism*: The signifier "the people" operates here as a *nodal point*, a point of reference around which other peripheral and often antithetical signifiers and ideas can become articulated; and (b) *Anti-elitism*: A dichotomic representation of the socio-political field between *Us* (the marginalised, the underdog, "the people") and *Them* (the establishment, the 1%, the elite).

This perspective highlights the emancipatory potential of certain populist discourses in representing excluded groups and facilitating social incorporation and democratic representation against oppressive and unaccountable power structures. At the same time, it remains alert to the fact that, due to the irreducible *impurity* of every relation of representation, due to the sliding capacity of signification, even genuine popular grievances and demands can end-up being represented by illiberal and anti-democratic forces or becoming hostages of authoritarian institutional dynamics. Its main aim is thus to introduce a more reflexive and sober investigation of the multitude of language games articulated around "the people", politics and populism both synchronically and diachronically.

Populism research stands to benefit from registering the different representations claiming the expression of popular interests, identities and demands and, in addition, the complex and polarised language games which develop around the symbolic expression and the affective investment of these demands. Such language games may involve the *recognition* or the *idealisation*, the *rejection* or the *demonisation* of the phenomenon in question (leading to the development of distinct populist and anti-populist camps).

Here, of course, recognition may emanate from an emancipatory desire for equal rights, while idealisation may arise from a reduction of the "popular" to the ethnic core of the nation. Similarly, rejection may involve a suspicion towards the specific ways through which popular demands are formulated and the political actors (parties, leaders, etc.) that promote them. But it may also signal an elitist foreclosure of popular sovereignty as the foundation of a democratic polity. Thus, both populist and anti-populist discourses can acquire "progressive" or "reactionary", democratic or anti-democratic forms. Which, of course, brings us to the question of typology.

Challenge 3: Rigorous typology

Apart from offering a set of operational criteria allowing the differential identification of populist discourses, this *formal* approach, this *architectonics* of political discourse, can also dynamically illuminate the crucial issue of capturing and accounting for different *types* or *degrees* of populist profiles.

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The important question is how is it possible to arrive at a differential identification of inclusionary from exclusionary types of populism? There are indeed two crucial differences between the two that become visible when they are examined through the formal lens of discursive architectonics: (a) in inclusionary populism "the people" operates as a fluid "empty signifier" without a fixed signified, while in exclusionary populism it usually refers back to a fantasmatic transcendental signified (the nation, race, etc.); in addition (b) in inclusionary populism the dichotomisation of the political space is arranged in a mostly vertical manner (up/down, high/low), while exclusionary populism involves a horizontal (inside/outside) dichotomic arrangement. The important analytical consequence of this theorisation is that what is often debated as extreme right-wing or exclusionary populism is, in effect, a nationalist, xenophobic ideology with only peripheral and/or secondary populist elements.

In populist discourses proper, then, apart from being located at the core of the discursive articulation, "the people" operates as an empty signifier, as a *signifier without signified*, so to speak. In contradistinction, when nationalist discourses employ the signifier the 'people', this is either located at the periphery of their chain of signification or, even *when it is given a more central place*, its populist emptiness is moderated significantly, referring it back to "race" or "nation", discursive units that in extreme right discourse often function as naturalised, original (mythical) points of reference, as Derridean "transcendental signifieds" attempting to fix signification once and for all.

In this sense, whereas (predominantly inclusionary) populist discourses potentially expand the chain of significations associated with "the people" – even including immigrants – (predominantly exclusionary) nationalist uses of "the people" attempt to arrest and limit this fluidity. At the same time, in spatial terms, populism proper is structured around a vertical, down/up or high/low axis that refers to power, status and hierarchical socio-cultural positioning, while nationalist or national-populist discourses prioritise a horizontal arrangement fashioned along the lines of nationalist out-grouping.

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