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POPULISM ON THE LOOSE: SEMINAL PREFLECTIONS ON THE CONDITION OF DIFFERENTIALITY

Urpo Kovala & Emilia Palonen

The term is on everyone's lips these days: shortcomings and liminality of traditional politics are blamed on it. The proliferation of the phenomenon commonly referred to as 'populism' is interesting because of its multifaceted character. Exploring instances of populism we can find similarities but contend that 'populism' exists in variations rather than as a specific form, demand or family of political parties. Hence, this multidisciplinary edited volume, *Populism on the Loose*, discusses and develops a range of definitions and concepts of populism. A central aim of our volume is to demonstrate the variety of the definitions and contexts of populism, and to give space for the process of defining populism. In this introductory chapter we pay attention to these defining processes that take place and to the differentiation between understandings and praxis of populism.

By claiming that populism is 'on the loose', we draw attention to the ways in which populism is articulated with varying contents. Populism as a punchline of our contemporary era turns it into a floating or an empty signifier – to borrow terminology from one of the political theorists of populism Ernesto Laclau's (2005). These key concepts of his understanding of both politics and populism are not static forms but logics and have related effects. When its meanings are being contested, populism appears as object of strife, a floating signifier. It plays a role in the articulation of meaning on the two sides of the contestation. When it works as a reference point for meanings, it turns into an empty signifier, overwhelmed by the variety in meaning making it loses specificity once afforded to it. This is when we no longer know exactly what populism is, even if we find it a common point of engagement.

When conferences set their focus on populism, colleagues use the occasion to extend the term. Others write books covering anthologies or aspects of it, or simply set out to define what populism is and anchor it with specific content, logic or style (e.g. Müller 2016; Moffitt 2016). Recently whole handbooks of populism have been published (e.g. Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017). In his field of political analysis, set definitions are necessary as one needs to know what to compare. Also different forms (e.g. De Raadt, Hollanders, and Krouwel 2004), types and degrees (Deegan-Krause & Haughton 2009) of populism have been discussed over the years. There is a recent trend is to try to tighten further the over-flowing usages and definitions of populism. In the field of comparative politics, particularly Cas Mudde (2007) carried out a successful definition project with ‘thin ideology’ (see also Stanley 2008), which fits the comparative analysis of both right and left populism (Rovira Kaltwasser & Mudde 2012). Others deal with populists as those who oppose liberal democracy (Pappas 2016), and further those linked with economic crises (e.g. Kriesi and Pappas 2015). Whether left or right, populism may vary in degrees between political parties, as Rooduijn and Akkerman (2017) demonstrate on people-centrism and anti-elitism. Yannis Stavrakakis (2014) has sought to address populism through anti-populism and affective ties. While populism can be negatively and positively perceived in its central imperative to ‘trust the people’ (Canovan 1999), it may be problematic for the analysis of the phenomenon itself to conflate it with nationalism (e.g. Palonen 2017). These do not simply emerge, but have to be constituted. Hence, rhetoric is crucial part of the phenomenon (Moffitt 2016). Rhetoric and practices have a constitutive role in both right-wing (Wodak 2015) and left-wing parties and movements (Katsambekis 2016, Kiuopkiolis 2016).

Definitions guide us to look for something – or try to offer common ground for discussion about the phenomenon. Fixing and unfixing meanings is an activity that shapes larger fields of understandings and connotations, it contests and maintains hegemony. Indeed, because of the proliferation, spreading, entangling and

multiplication of the phenomenon itself, there is no single answer to what is populism. As the definition of populism is on the loose and the phenomenon spreads, it may be only relevant to explore these different aspects of the phenomenon and the ways in which it would also have consequences to the ways in which we may define populism. Our volume demonstrates how the definition of populism is not only contested but also perpetually in process of redefinition – instead of relying on one definition, the volume presents this multivocality as an analytical undertaking.

In the everyday language scientific notions of populism have not been fixed, despite strong attempts by comparative politics scholars in the news commentary and social media, Mudde included. This book is probably the anti-thesis of the negative marking Twitter-active academics engage with #schmopolism offering tools for detecting populism from what it is not (Stanley 2016). Instead of revealing ‘wrong’ usages of the term we enhance the field with new perspectives to phenomena related to populism and develop new understandings drawing on cultural studies and political theory. These would be helpful in analysing what gets entangled with ‘populism’.

One could argue that populism tout court does not really constitute an object of study. It always requires some attributes, or context. What makes this volume interesting for a ‘field of populism research’, if any exists, is the ways in which its writers negotiate space for studying populism. As they do not take it for granted as an object of study, they need to engage in conceptual work.

Contextualisations and conceptualisations of populism

Besides focusing on political science rather than political meaning-making and rhetoric, very often research on populism draws from examples from either West European countries or Latin America. It has been argued that ideas develop in peripheries where centre’s views merge. As Henrik Stenius (2017, 263–4), an expert in Nordic

Studies, argues, peripheral actors were forced to navigate between centres, which gives peripheral actors potential to reveal the universalist credentials of the centre. In the same vein he argues that the centre probably will not be listening to the arguments from the peripheries. Even in this necessary but hopefully productive asymmetry (Nygård and Strang 2016; Jalava, Nygård and Strang 2018) by publishing a peer reviewed e-book from the University of Jyväskylä, we hope to reveal new aspects that perhaps even challenge the mainstream conceptualisations or, at least, offer food for thought.

Our volume seeks to exploit perspectives from some of the semi-peripheries of these discussions. These may be limit cases of populism, which include similar features such as Chavez and Erdoğan, or the lesser known Romanian context, which reveals it is not straightforward to simply apply the concepts of populism of the centre. We tackle issues which are seen as peripheral to populism in many of its studies, the limits of the people and othering that constitutes the ‘people’ for the populist rhetoric. Exploring the link between polarisation and populism (c.f. Palonen 2009), many of these chapters look at the dichotomous rhetoric at the core for populism that a fully anti-essentialist conceptualisation of populism entails.

Seen in a systematic differential light, the notion of populism starts to disperse. There may be different constructions of the people in one the same populist movement. In the case of Finland, the notion has been crucial in the party leader Timo Soini’s rhetoric but not in that of Jussi Halla-aho, who became his successor as the leader of the Finns party in the summer of 2016 and hardly uses the term. There may be varying degrees of authoritarianism. The degree of polarization, which is so central to populism, may also vary considerably. Historical backgrounds can be very different - for instance between Eastern and Western Europe, as Mihnea-Simion Stoica in this volume points out. Different populisms also incorporate very different mythologies or ‘heartlands’ (Taggart 2000). Furthermore, populisms can be placed differently on the left-right continuum.

One of the key tensions in this volume is between the analysis of populist parties or dynamics related to populist parties, and populist rhetoric emerging elsewhere. While in the first part of the volume we explore political parties, in the second part we draw attention directly related to gender and its intersectional connections in populist rhetoric and movements. The final part of the volume explores other dimensions of populism – definitions of populism in the media, emergence and definition of hate speech and a new field of cultural populism or the emergence of dichotomous speech in culture. The most traditional field of populism research is the field of political parties. Going through the first part of this volume we can witness spill-overs to the cultural field. Going through some of the arguments made in the first part of the volume, we can see how populism becomes a cultural polarising force.

In the introduction we first explore the contextual variation, then cover the conceptual work, and finally highlight what actually is at stake in the different chapters. In so doing, we end up discussing the fleeting character of populism in populism studies. This volume highlights aspects of populism rarely discussed, such as intersectional and gender studies approaches, conceptual historical analysis, as well as populism in not so explicitly political contexts. When populism mainstreams, dichotomous speech and the generation of ‘us’ and ‘them’ spreads from politics to different other fields. The conceptual work shows for example in Tuula Vaarakallio’s article exploring the meanings of ‘populism’, but it is also present in Björn Fryklund’s article that demonstrates variety within ‘populist parties’ in the Nordic countries. Even in the latter (Scandinavia and Finland), which are considered to be culturally and societally rather similar, political populism has emerged at different pace and with different faces. The distinctions in the phenomenon in Eastern and Western Europe are outlined by Mihnea-Simion Stoica. The phenomenon and its entanglement with media is explored even in Venezuela by Virpi Salojärvi. The chapters on gender by Elisa Bel-lè and Barbara Poggio, Tuija Saresma and Jiri Nieminen highlight new dimensions in populism research regarding gender. The chap-

ters by Halil Gürhanlı and Emilia Palonen explore the conceptual limits of populism.

One of the reasons why populism has become a more and more studied phenomenon, is that it is not merely evidenced in the usual materials for comparative politics, for instance, election results and party manifestos, but rather is visible in the media, policy-making and many fields where political meaning-making takes place. We seek to cover some of these discussions in this volume.

Populism on the loose – in the political parties

In the first part of the volume, one of the well-known experts in Nordic Populism, Björn Fryklund argues that right-wing populism offers a gateway for understanding and explaining the effect of Sweden Democrats in the Swedish political system, related to migration and the consequences to the welfare state – once politicized, it boosted the support of the SD, just as in the other Nordic countries. It is a democratic dilemma, as the SD emerged through a parliamentary system with popular electoral support but with undemocratic values.

In fact, this is very close to what happened in Turkey, where the AKP also emerged through the parliamentary system by attracting electoral support. The AKP, in the same way as the SD, was able to argue for a crisis of representation as a crisis of democracy, providing a dichotomy between the powerholding elites and its consensual points and Kemalist foundations. Populism may however turn into something else altogether. Halil Gürhanlı's article explores the limits of populism through the case of Turkey. What happens to populism when the political difference it articulates is reduced to the love/hate of the leader and the polarisation of society down to the most intimate relationships.

Fryklund points to the illiberal and anti-immigration character of right-wing populism and the essentialisation of the people. In the case of AKP the love of Erdoğan seems to have replaced the con-

tents or political demands themselves. What remains is the political frontier between the true-believers and the enemies of the regime. In Figure 1 Gürhanlı outlines how ‘actual populism’ takes place in the space where institutionalism ends and populism develops into ‘pure populism’. The democratic ethos of populism lies within the connection to politics and the political, but ‘pure populism’ is already far beyond it.

Drawing on Ernesto Laclau’s work, Gürhanlı explains how the situation has become polarised: ‘if there is one thing anti-Erdoğanists have in common with Erdoğanists, it is their understanding of politics as an existential war.’ Polarisation sustains the two communities and generates a deadlock (c.f. on Hungary, Palonen 2009). Any criticism from the outside is interpreted in a historical framework where Turkey is portrayed as the perpetual underdog and reduced back to the polarisation where the well-meaning efforts to speak for the opposition in Turkey only enhance polarisation.

Virpi Salojärvi reconnects the analysis to Gramsci and the way in which the generation of us vs. them is a hegemonic operation which is carried over through politics and the media. She studies the case of Venezuela under Hugo Chávez and how the people, the leader, and the enemy were framed in the media. The ‘Chavista’ frames generated a sense of community. The key signifiers of Chavismo such as the people (*el pueblo*) and the sovereign (*el soberano*) were used synonymously but generated different interpretations in different parts of the society. Yet again they reproduced a line of polarisation. Both Chavez and his sympathisers and the Venezuelan opposition appealed to the people, and sought to generate a counter-hegemony.

In the case that Mihnea Stoica outlines, the dichotomy is established between Western and Eastern European populism. Like Salojärvi and others, he recognises populist techniques or discursive strategies such as anti-elitism, people-centrism, scapegoating and appeals for direct democracy.

In the same way as Salojärvi recognised populist rhetoric on both sides, Stoica finds multiple populist actors in Romania. Sto-

ica's findings draw attention to the meaning of the people and the praxis of democracy: while in the West appeals to direct democracy were made, in Romania this theme has marginal role in the populist rhetoric. The main difference between the two populist parties in Romania Stoica investigates laid in the focus of their rhetoric the Greater Romania Party, PRM, founded by the poet Vadim Tudor, focused on the economical crisis, whereas for the PPDD, Dan Diaconescu's People's Party, the issue was social, moral and political. Stoica's paper draws on a clear distinction between the two populist parties in the substance of their argumentation.

Nevertheless, he also reveals how there is a clear distinction between the political cultures of Eastern and Western Europe. In Eastern Europe, power has typically been distanced from the people - one could even say in the ethos of Antipolitics by György Konrád, or Power of the Powerless by Vaclav Havel that it had been distanced or even seen as a dirty game in the 1980s and from the 1990s on was delegated to the politicians. Hence, not all the arguments typical of populism travel past the divide between Eastern and Western Europe.

Intersectional analysis of populism

In the second part of this volume, the focus shifts to articulations of a second order – that is, to what are called intersectional relations between different approaches or perspectives to populism. In this line of thinking, accounts of populism should take heed of the multiplicity of 'background variables' or differences between people and groups of people and their social and societal backgrounds and especially the interplay and intersections of these backgrounds and the tensions and negotiations involved.

In this section of our volume, the attention is on the intersections of gender and religion especially. The article by Elisa Bellè and Barbara Poggio and that of Tuija Saresma address the populist nature of anti-feminist movements in Italy and Finland. The artic-

ulations of those movements are different - the former deals with the articulation of religion and 'anti-gender' politics, finding resonance with the article by Jiri Nieminen, who sets out to thematise a religious movement and ends up studying the nexus of gender, religion, and politics. The movement dealt with by Nieminen is the Finnish branch of the Patmos Foundation for World Missions. Tuija Saresma, in turn, takes up three cases and looks at the ways gender is performed in them. She shows that in these cases, gender is performed in a conservative, traditionalist way, underlining the strict and insurmountable gender roles for men and women. The contribution by Jyrki Pöysä and Urpo Kovala adds to this the analysis of the interconnections between rhetoric and media performance on one hand and identity politics on the other. In their chapter they look at the ways leading politicians of the Finns Party have appealed to masculinity and masculine values in their rhetoric and performance, and the nature of the masculinities brought to the fore in their political figures and the politics of the Finns party. In particular, they focus on the long-term leader of the Finns Party Timo Soini, who became the Foreign Minister and in 2017 the leader of the splinter group Blue Reform, when the party he was establishing on the remains of the Finnish Rural Party in 1995 split into two.

The contributions to this section illustrate how also the scope of the 'political' varies when the relationship between populist practices and gender takes on different articulations. Notions and definitions of an 'ordinary bloke', religious propriety, or naturalness and normality, and the strict distinction between friends and enemies, which recur in the analyses in these articles, turn out to presuppose the same kinds of conceptions of society that nativist political populism rests on, although the cases mostly move beyond the sphere of party politics.

These four articles together exemplify beautifully the importance of looking at differences, intersections and negotiations in connection with populism. What is in common between the articles is the focus on gender as conceived of in an intersectional perspective. Gender populism, to use Tuija Saresma's term here, is actually

a rather understudied topic within populism studies, partly because of the predominance of political studies in the field. The contributions here are more interdisciplinary, drawing on several disciplinary contexts in addition to political studies - linguistics, cultural studies, gender studies, and sociology especially.

Populism on the loose and floating

When populism gets on the loose, it floats to different dimensions and takes different paths. After the global although predominantly European approach above, in this section we explore cases from Finland. Even in this single country case context, definitions of populism are floating. The first two cases are related to the emergence of the Finns Party, and the third one is exploring the ways in which dichotomous speech present in the rhetoric related to the populist Finns Party is actually emerging in another field where meanings are debated: namely cultural policy. The authors explore meaning-making in newspapers, parliamentary debates and policy papers.

Populism's heterogeneous reference points emerges as a crucial dimension in Tuula Vaarakallio's article. In the Finnish national daily the range of references to populism followed usual discussions in the field of populism research (also Vaarakallio & Palonen 2017). Crucially, it was often used with positive and empowering connotations while this changed after the general elections in 2011 that brought a landslide of votes to the Finns Party.

One of the phenomena that is related to the emergence of populism is hate speech. In her article Maria Ruotsalainen explores how this takes place in practice in the Finnish Parliament where hate speech is debated and contested. The duality often present in populist rhetoric and constitution of subjectivity is also present in the parliamentary debate. Accusations of hate speech lead to self-victimization by those who are associated with hate speech themselves. Rhetorical moves of generating two extremes from one is a chosen strategy by the populist party.

In the final chapter of the volume, populism is precisely related to dichotomous speech and the constitution of 'us' in this contesting manner. However, now we make a leap from the traditional field of politics to the field of policy and cultural identities, which can be equally political and significant for meaning making. Exploring the case of Guggenheim Museum plans in Helsinki, Emilia Palonen's article shows how 'us' and 'them' are constituted through their mutual opposition and by claiming certain key elements. The dualism is there from the start. Even if this piece departs from the analysis of the Finns Party in this volume, rest assured, also the long-term leader of the Finns Party Timo Soini is featured in this piece.

Definitional struggle in overflow of empiria

Floating character is typical of populism. It may be a frustrating dimension for those engaged with research and commentary: how convenient it would be if we could indeed agreed on a single definition as Mudde (2007) has proposed – or perhaps a normative stand as Müller (2016) has argued! But it is typical of populism to contest, resist and rearticulate these definitions. Dichotomies where meanings are floating are typical of populism. Hence, the 'us' or the 'self' or the 'populist' is often left slightly ambiguous. The play of definitions is part and parcel of meaning-making, and populist praxis and research of populism both produce definitions. This is the logic of populism in Ernesto Laclau's (2005) seminal work. While some researchers following his work fix the reference point of 'people' at the heart of populism, his work has been extended from the angle of the study of rhetoric to cover the ways in which the style of meaning-making is at the core.

Looking from an interdisciplinary perspective we recognise how populism gets entangled with religion (Nieminen's chapter) and gender dimensions (Saresma's and Bellè & Poggio's chapter). While contesting and generating dichotomies, populist rhetoric and its ideological aspects generate a norm. Populism is seen as emerg-

ing from new forms of representation: the demand of who are being represented and who impede the possibility to be represented becomes the dominant frontier of antagonism. These may well get entangled with nationalism, gender – or even cultural policy!

The gendered dimensions of populist rhetoric, as said, reveal something more about the ways in which populist movements make meanings. Sometimes this is very much essentialising particular dichotomies and establishing lines of antagonism. Often, however, the multiple dimensions in which populist movement's rhetoric is drawn, confuse this clear picture. The set of contradictory elements assigned to or claimed by the movement empty it from particular meanings. The floating signifiers, typical in making clear political difference in Laclau's theory become empty signifiers. These, following Laclau are crucial in bringing unity to the movement.

In a similar fashion, in this book it has been the exploration of the concept of populism (and its limits) in different fields that has brought together these studies. The role of rhetoric and the making of meaning, the constitution of an 'us' and the character of populist movements play important roles in understanding of the concept and deciding upon what to study. New fields of inquiry open from attention to populism and the arts and culture. It is one of the dimensions that we hope to study in more depth in the future. Reflecting on this 'trendy' topic of populism(s) we may also address crucial dimensions of articulation of us and them, democracy and its limits, as well as the transnational flow of ideas.

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