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# **THE CONCEPT OF POPULISM IN THE FINNISH NEWSPAPER *HELSINGIN SANOMAT***

**Tuula Vaarakallio**

## **ABSTRACT**

The concept of populism is ambiguous and controversial and has a wide variety of academic, political and other interpretations. Taken as a given that concepts have no self-evident definitions or fixed meanings, the paper will focus on the concept of populism in its use in the daily Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*. The starting point for the paper is the Wittgensteinian idea according to which the meaning of a word is its use in the language. The approach is not philosophical, but conceptual, as I examine the concept of populism through the lens of conceptual history. The conceptual approach emphasises how the concept is used within context and how it is defined and constructed in it. Primary sources of the research are editorials, columns and letters from public in *Helsingin Sanomat* during parliamentary election years of 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015. The views on populism of the *HS* can be seen as a modest ‘representative anecdote’ (Kenneth Burke) about how populism was perceived and changed in the Finnish print media discussion – in the context where the populist Finns party became Finland’s third largest party in 2011.

## **Introduction**

My aim in this paper is to examine the concept of populism through the lens of conceptual history. The starting point of the conceptual historical approach (Hyvärinen et al. 2003; Koselleck 2004; Skinner 1996) is to understand that concepts are historically and linguistically constructed. This is to say that concepts are always polemical.

cal and controversial and there is neither a fixed nor single meaning nor a self-evident definition for a particular concept. In this sense, the concept of populism is a case in point because it is ambiguous and has a variety of interpretations. The idea of conceptual historical approach is indeed to examine diverse interpretations and usages of the concept within a specific context, in my case in the daily *Helsingin Sanomat*, the leading print media in Finland. Therefore my primary question was: how is ‘populism’ defined and constructed on the pages of *Helsingin Sanomat*?

My primary sources in this research have been editorials, columns and letters to the editor in *Helsingin Sanomat* during parliamentary election years of 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015. The most important event characterising the political context during these years was the sudden rise of the populist party, Perussuomalaiset (the Finns Party) in the parliamentary elections of 2011. In that year the party gained a historically large electoral victory (19 %, 39 seats) and became all at once the third largest party in Finland.

This contextual shift naturally meant that the topic of populism was suddenly on everyone’s lips. In this sense the discussions in HS, which is a leading newspaper in Finland, can be seen as a ‘representative anecdote’ (Burke 1945) about how populism was perceived at the time in the Finnish print media discussion, how it was changed along with the rise and mainstreaming of Finnish populism.

My findings that I will here present are preliminary remarks. My analysis in detail concerning the newspaper material is still in progress. Therefore my observations here are mainly ones that stand out from the data and appear most frequently in the texts. In addition, I will here concentrate mainly on the material surrounding the year 2011 because it was the year of the Finns Party’s electoral victory and will therefore represent the general discussion on populism in this short presentation.

## **Populism as a foreign phenomenon and a special rhetorical style**

Before proceeding, I will bring out some general remarks from the period before 2011. Generally speaking, and concerning the timeline from the year 2003 to 2015, it was interesting to notice that in 2003 and 2007 populism was referred to and regarded as a completely foreign phenomenon which does not affect Finland and which had no ‘general political significance’ in the Finnish context because ‘populism as a political force hasn’t played any political role in Finland since Veikko Vennamo’s Rural Party’ (the party was a forerunner for the contemporary Finns Party in the 70’s and 80’s). (HS 4.3.2007, Erkki Pennanen’s editorial.) One editorial, for example, stated that ‘politicians in Finland avoid cheap populism’ (10.6.2003) and another one said about the concept of populism that ‘it is better to avoid using the concept of populism as a commonplace in political language because [populism] is not reality in Finland as it is elsewhere in Europe’ (HS 20.1.2003, editorial by Erkki Pennanen).

This editorial referred to the fact that populism was tackled and analysed within the columns of HS quite often – as it was. But before 2011 the concept was discussed either relating it to contemporary populist movements in Europe (e.g. France, Scandinavia, Russia, Netherlands) or with connection to populist rhetoric. Most often it was defined as a special type of rhetorical style used by any political agent whatsoever. In this respect, rhetorical populism was more connected with any political movement and not necessarily limited to certain movements or parties labelled as populist. At that time, it must be noted, the True Finns party hadn’t yet got any substantial electoral success even though the party was founded already in 1995.

When perceived as a rhetorical style, populism was commonly regarded as a means to an end, a means to appeal to the people, to the masses and to the electorate. One editorial, for example, pointed out that populism as a commonplace implies all rhetoric that woos

or courts the people. At that point the writer, Erkki Pennanen, also asked a relevant question: if populism is about appealing to the people, how does it then differ from any other kinds of political rhetoric? (HS 20.1.2003.)

Populist style of rhetoric and the means of this particular style were generally described in HS as fishing for votes - i.e. as a means to get support for the party. The populist type of rhetoric was often labelled as 'cheap populism' which uses the usual arsenal of populist rhetorical tools. The tools or strategies characterising populist rhetoric were seen in a variety of ways. It was, for example, identified as a rhetoric that gives empty political promises before elections that nobody remembers afterwards. It was also featured as using theatrical or circus style rhetorical tricks – most often with regard to political opposition. It was also recognised as a rhetoric simplifying complicated issues into demagogic slogans. By simplifying issues, populism narrows down the room for political alternatives and therefore populists easily stick to one-sided political worldviews. (HS 2003, 2007 passim.)

Besides these features populist rhetoric as a means of populist politics was opposed to a 'serious' form of politics allegedly free from 'easy populism'. In the same vein, populist rhetoric was linked with anti-intellectualism and it was also compared to irrational verbal acts which lean on vague images instead of facts (and here one point of reference was the Finns Party's Tony Halme who was one of the first celebrity MP's in the Finnish parliament with very populist and thin political views). Populism was also interpreted as 'a political word of abuse', as a pejorative notion with which to label one's political opponents.

As one can see, *Helsingin sanomat* characterises populist rhetoric with rather banal and not very original features. These qualities could have been taken from any textbook that defines populist rhetoric. Many academics have previously analysed and theorised these rhetorical features more thoroughly (e.g. Taguieff 2002.) It is also significant that the writers of *Helsingin Sanomat* while referring to the populist rhetoric, were commonly interpreting it as a more or

less negative rhetoric. The populist rhetoric was therefore to be despised, not worth cherishing.

### **Electoral success of populism and its link to the crisis discourse**

Just before the parliamentary elections in April 2011, speaking of populism in *Helsingin Sanomat* became more frequent. While in 2003 the word populis\* occurred in HS editorials and opinion pieces 37 times and in 2007 47 times, in 2011 the word populis\* was mentioned 118 times. In 2015 the talk about populism was again less frequent and the concept appeared 75 times.

But if the talk of populism increased in frequency in 2011, also the construction and interpretation of populism in the newspaper changed. The political atmosphere based on different opinion polls before parliamentary elections anticipated a change in the Finnish party system. There was fear that the Finns Party could even try to achieve the post of the prime minister and therefore many writers worried about the populism of the Finns Party and its links to the anti-immigration agenda. In editorials and columns, there emerged a direct link with the anti-immigration thematic and the Finns Party and some writers also expressed their concern about the mainstreaming of the Finns Party populism and spreading of the anti-immigration theme to other parties' discourse as well. Of course the theme of mainstreaming populism was much more visible after the 2011 elections when the True Finns left out of the government. Not to mention the situation after 2015 elections when the party finally entered the government.

But back to the year 2011. Simultaneously as populism was adopted as a concept now belonging to the Finnish political context, it also started to appear as a concept connected to the crisis speech.

On the pages of *Helsingin Sanomat* populism was seen as a symptom of various crises and as a reaction towards disparate phe-

nomena. Among such phenomena were, for example, market economy based on constant economic growth, overall commercialisation, EU's integration and common currency, financial crisis and EU's austerity politics, globalisation and the so-called crisis of democracy.

Overall this reaction can be crystallised in a one word: insecurity, be it social, political or general uncertainty [in Finnish *yleinen epävarmuus*]. Various articles, whether editorials or pieces from the public, tried to analyse and discuss such social or political 'reasons' behind the rise of populism.

For sure, such rhetorical, sometimes even causal relationship between populism and different sorts of political, social or economic crises is, too, a very common and historically old way (*topos*) both to legitimate populist politics (by populists themselves) and also to discuss and analyse its success (by others). By no doubt, this discussion in *Helsingin Sanomat* was associated with the wider public debate prevailing at the same time in Finnish society – the debate that dealt with Finnish style of consensual politics or with the sense of crisis concerning party system and democracy at large.

The national daily also discussed populism as a phenomenon that echoes popular discontent in the context of various on-going crises. Populism was hence interpreted as a negative political protest towards the proclaimed state of crises and various dysfunctions within it. But at the same time, the reaction of the people, the people who give their protest votes to populist parties was, in some articles, regarded also as a healthy way to channel the popular discontent.

Related to these comments, it was interesting to see whose concept populism in this connection was – to whom it was related?

If populism is based on the axiom about a basic distinction between the elite and the people, then both the elite and the people are normally presented – in the populist discourse at least – as homogeneous, monolithic and undefined entities. The newspaper gave however quite a lot of space to views where the people was interpreted as a marginalised part of the people (*plebs*) which in 2011 elections

finally had a political voice in a form of a vote given to the Finns Party. (Cf. e.g. Taguieff 2013, 1359–1365.) In this connection, the electoral rise of the Finns Party was interpreted as a victory for Finnish democracy in terms to voter turnout and in terms to the fact that the Finns Party has had courage to highlight difficult questions surrounding the EU and immigration – questions that other parties tend to avoid.

In the letters to the editor section the HS published many analyses, mostly from university professors (eg. Tapio Raunio, HS 29.6.2011), who found it positive to have some political dissensus and various political standpoints within the traditionally very consensual Finnish political system. Hence, the rise of populism to the fore was considered not only as a threat to democracy but also as a corrective to democracy. The populist political force was then seen as a re-politicizing power that brings to the fore issues that were otherwise forgotten or avoided. At the same time, this agenda highlighted the status of the marginalised people at the society. In my personal view, these writings indicated that the HS was able to tackle problematic issues at that time in quite a balanced way.

If the HS considered populism as a somewhat re-politicizing concept and phenomenon before and during the year 2011, the focus was moved after 2011 from populism's relations to democracy clearly to the relationship between populism and immigration. (For example in 2003 xenophobic attitudes were not associated with populism at all.)

The central question since then was rather how populism creates and intensifies dichotomies between various groups: nationalities, genders, generations – or between people with different sexual orientation or social classes. 'Populism' then became also more or less reduced to the conflicting discussion surrounding immigration and anti-immigrant attitudes. In this connection populism as a concept was represented more in a moral register: for example a clear division was made between the 'bad' populists and the 'good' intelligentsia – and this division was also debated and challenged in



the newspaper. (E.g. Pasi Sillanpää, HS 19.2.2011; Vesa Kannianen, HS 28.2.2011.)

## Conclusions

At this point, in conclusion, I am ready to claim that populism in HS was constructed and discussed quite traditionally - without major surprises. The most interesting thing, in my view, was to notice the slight conceptual shift in the interpretation of populism which took place around 2011 and was naturally contextually connected to the Finns Party's electoral victory. Before 2011 populism was merely seen as a general rhetorical style in the Finnish political context linked mostly to the former Finnish populist history and to the Finnish Rural Party's tradition. At that time, contemporary populism was also seen more as a foreign phenomenon that concerned other European countries but not contemporary Finland.

Just before and after the 2011 Parliamentary elections, the interpretation surrounding the concept changed and got more nuanced. 'Populism' was discussed in relation with wider social and political contexts and its significance as a political phenomenon was weighted in terms of democracy, for example. Furthermore, its links to the issue of immigration later on complicated the understanding of the concept and opened up the antagonisms incorporated within it. From the electoral year 2011 onwards populism was seen in *Helsingin Sanomat* as a force that intensifies social and political dichotomies and represents more a threat than a constructive force to the prevailing political society.

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