

## An after - thought on populism

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### Abstract

Populism serves many masters and mistresses. At different times and in different places it has been a force for change a force against change, a creature of progressive politics of the left, the refuge of a measured defence of the status quo and a companion of the extreme right. The term is used widely, but often defined narrowly. It is used to dismiss some proposal as too popular, or as popular with certain sorts of people.

**Keywords:** populism, politics, popular, mistresses

### Introduction

For such a commonly used term, it is surprising how little attention populism has received as a concept. Where it has been dealt with systematically, populism as a concept has found little agreement surrounding it. Like the emergence of populist movements themselves, attempts to capture the essence of populism have sprung up at different times and in different places, but it is very difficult to see a consistent pattern. Most have seen populism as specific to the context in which they are focused. The more ambitious have attempted to define populism in universal terms. Others have portrayed it as variegated with no essence but with varieties.

Edward Shils gave a contextual definition of populism when he wrote in direct reaction to the McCarthyism of the United States in the 1950s<sup>[1]</sup>. Seeing populism as multifaceted and as permeating Nazi dictatorship in Germany and Bolshevism in Russian, Shils suggests that populism exists wherever there is an ideology of popular resentment against the order imposed on society by a long established, differentiated ruling class which is believed to have a monopoly of power, property breeding and culture. For Shils the key to understanding populism lies in the relationship between elites and masses. Populism is portrayed as deeply ambivalent in its attitude towards institutions- those of the state, universities, bureaucracy, financial institutions.

This later extended his analysis of populism to explain populism in Africa and Asia. Drawing the parallels with populism in the USA and Russia to describe the populism of the intellectual elites in Africa and Asia, Shils argues that populism is characterized by oppositionalism<sup>[2]</sup>.

Kornhauser drew on Shils's definition of populism for his own analysis of mass society. He argued that populism is both cause and effect of mass society, as it is the denial of plurality and the assertion of uniformity in the face of social differentiation. Mass society therefore gives rise to populist democracy, which he contrasted to liberal democracy. Populist democracy involves direct participation of the people as a way of circumventing the institutions and associations of representation<sup>[3]</sup>.

Torcuato Di Tella examines populism in Latin America but does so in a way that is explicitly comparative, especially with the European experience. Populism is, therefore, for Di

Tella, a function of the process of development of societies as they move towards modernity. Implicitly, Di Tella stresses that populism is characterized by a sense of differentiation between those who are poor and those who are part of the elite and by the social characteristics of the supporting coalition. Di Tella emphasizes that a sense of differentiation occurs both between elites in less economically developed countries who compare themselves with elites in more developed countries<sup>[4]</sup>.

The new populism is a contemporary form of populism that emerged, primarily but not exclusively in Western Europe, in the last part of the twentieth century. It is a populism that has been advocated by a number of parties on the far right of the political spectrum as a reaction against the dominance and the agenda of certain key parties of government in their party systems, and which is usually associated with particular political leaders. Learning from the 'new politics' parties and movements of the left in the 1970s and 1980s, the new populism has combined its ideological critique of the prevailing politics with the adoption of structural forms that embody its critique of political parties. Unlike the cases of populism examined in previous pages, the new populism is not a single party or movement but rather a series of different political parties in different countries arising during the same period and characterized by some very similar themes<sup>[5]</sup>.

The post-war consensus that prevailed in most Western European states after the Second World War embodied the ideals of social democracy and the commitment to a mixed economy, Keynesianism and the welfare state, and extended not only from social democratic parties but also to Christian democratic and conservative and liberal parties. In addition to new parties and a new agenda, social democracy also contributed a new form of political party, the mass party, reliant on mass membership.

The first big challenge to the post-war consensus came in the form of the new social movements in the 1970s and 1980s. These movements advocated a commitment to the environment, feminism, students rights, and opposed nuclear power and war. The movements found their party expression in the new politics. These were primarily green parties but also parties of the new left that merged the egalitarianism of the traditional left with a new commitment to libertarianism,

opposing the extension of the state and power that occurred under the post-war consensus<sup>[6]</sup>.

New politics parties challenges to politics were as much associated with the style of politics as with the new politics agenda. As a way of embodying their opposition to the bureaucratized state and therefore also the highly rigid, bureaucratized and hierarchical political parties, many green parties established ways of organizing that downplayed leadership by having spokespersons rather than leaders. There was a concerted effort to ensure gender balance in these positions, as an embodiment of their commitment to the new politics agenda of gender equality, and so often the leadership was collective. In an attempt to further avoid the personalization of politics, they adopted rotation as a principle so that key posts would not stay with individual figures in the party<sup>[7]</sup>.

This new populism, like the new politics, reacted against the development of a heavily bureaucratized welfare state and stressed the corruption and collusion in established political parties like the new politics, new populism rejected the consensus of the post war settlement, but, unlike the new politics, it sought to reconstruct politics around issues of taxation, immigration and nationalism or regionalism. The new populism represents a contemporary form of populism that stems from a populist rejection of the political agenda, institutions and legitimacy of the modern welfare state model of mixed economy capitalism. No populist parties organize themselves in ways that are in contrast to those of existing parties. One of the reasons for this is that populism has an inherent distrust of political institutions in general and political parties in particular<sup>[8]</sup>.

The variation in the different forms that the new populism has taken is predominantly linked to the different types of issues that they use to mobilize support. Immigration, regionalism and taxation are stressed to varying degrees depending on the national context.

At heart, new populism is an attack on the nature of political parties, and therefore on the form that representative politics has come to take in the countries in which it arises. In both the form that they take and in the positions they adopt, new populists embody a radical critique of existing parties. Organizationally they deliberately construct themselves in ways that do not resemble the established parties.

New populism allows us the clearest view of the anti-institutional predisposition of populism. Looking at such a wide and in some aspects, divergent set of examples, what shines through in this populism is a rejection of political parties and their form. The new populists are telling indicators that the agents of representative politics, parties are in difficulties in many liberal democracies. Political parties are in a process of transformation away from the mass party model. At the same time, there is evidence that citizen attitudes towards politics in many liberal democracies are becoming more alienated and negative. The difficulty is that the populist answer is the rejection of parties and therefore a rejection of the importance of political association and therefore of representative politics. The presence of new populism indicates problems with parties, but its own inherent ambivalence towards parties and the difficulties that new populism has in practically adopting but ideologically rejecting the party form, means that new populists do not offer a solution to these problems.

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