

MEDIATED POLITICS AND THE POPULIST POLITICAL STYLE INTRODUCTION TO THE FOCUS SECTION

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Slippery. Vague. Elusive. Contested. Analytically weak. Politically promiscuous.¹ These have all been used to describe the concept of populism. It is a challenging concept to deal with partly because of its normative popular usage, where the label populism has begun to function as a shorthand for anti-democratic and illiberal politics, often times far-right politics. At the same time, the concept is debated academically, is context-specific, and is therefore much more complex and nuanced than its popular understandings.

The classification of a leader, party, supporters, or movement as populist is shaped by how populism itself is conceptualized. There is vast literature on this topic, which Moffitt and Tormey (2014) categorize according to the following general approaches: populism as ideology, populism as a political logic, populism as discourse, populism as strategy, and their own approach, populism as a political style.² There are overlaps between these approaches, and each has its strengths and weaknesses. In the interest of brevity, I will briefly outline them below, at the risk of oversimplification.

Cas Mudde is a key proponent of the first approach. He conceptualizes populism as a “thin-centered ideology” that is anchored on an antagonistic division of society into “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite” and a desire to

express the general will of the people. It is “thin-centered” because it is “malleable” and can attach itself to a “host” ideology.³

Meanwhile, populism as a political logic draws from Ernesto Laclau’s argument that populism is the logic of the political in that it is “a way of constructing the political.” Politics, he asserts, is populist because it includes some degree of antagonism between ‘the people’ and an ‘other.’ ‘The people’ as a populist symbol is

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an “empty signifier” that unifies heterogeneous demands through a chain of equivalences and becomes the basis for the emergence of ‘the people’ as a political force.⁴

Laclau influences the third approach:

populism as discourse. Francisco Panizza, who calls their approach “symptomatic readings,” argues that populism is an “anti-status quo discourse that simplifies the political space by symbolically dividing society between ‘the people’ (as the ‘underdogs’) and its ‘other.’ Following Laclau, ‘the people’ and ‘the other’ are both political constructs, symbolically constituted through the relation of antagonism.” Antagonism here is seen as a “mode of identification.” That is, the relation between the people as signifier and the people as signified emerges through the process of naming, which establishes “who the enemies of the people (and therefore the people itself) are.”⁵

Populism as strategy derives from Kurt Weyland who defines populism as “a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers.”⁶ The emphasis here is on the leader’s strategies to gain and maintain political power through mass support.

Finally, Moffitt and Tormey propose an approach to populism that sees it as a political style, or “the repertoires of performance that are used to create political relations.” This approach to populism, they contend, acknowledges and highlights “the fact that the contemporary political landscape is intensely mediated and ‘stylised,’ and as such the so-called ‘aesthetic’ or ‘performative’ features are particularly (and increasingly) important.” The focus of this approach is on “performance, performativity, actors, audiences, stages, scripts, mise en scène, and so forth;” their mediation through old and new media; their effects; and resonance with members of the public.

The populist political style, they suggest, consists of (1) an appeal to ‘the people’ and the dichotomous division between ‘the people’ and ‘an other;’ (2) the perception of crisis, breakdown, or threat; and (3) ‘bad manners’ where there is a “coarsening of the political language.” They argue that understanding populism as a political style enables us to explain populism across the political spectrum. At the same time, it provides a

1 MAZZARELLA, W. (2019). “THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF POPULISM: BEYOND THE LIBERAL SENTIMENT.” *ANNUAL REVIEW OF ANTHROPOLOGY*, (48), PP. 45-60.
2 MOFFITT, B. AND TORMEY, S. (2014). RETHINKING POPULISM, MEDIATISATION, AND POLITICAL STYLE. *POLITICAL STUDIES*, (62), PP. 381-397.

3 MUDDE, C. AND ROVIRA KALT WASSER, C. (2017). WHAT IS POPULISM?. IN: *POPULISM: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION*. LONDON: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, PP. 1-20.

4 LACLAU, E. (2005). *ON POPULIST REASON*. NEW YORK: VERSO.

5 PANIZZA, F. (2005). INTRODUCTION: POPULISM AND THE MIRROR OF DEMOCRACY. IN: F. PANIZZA, ED., *POPULISM AND THE MIRROR OF DEMOCRACY*. NEW YORK: VERSO, PP. 1-31.

6 WEYLAND (2001, 14) IN MOFFITT AND TORMEY 2014, 386.

frame for interrogating populism’s “‘mainstream’ appropriations,” that is, to analyse leaders who employ some elements of the populist political style at certain points of their careers but are not necessarily considered populist. Furthermore, it provides a way of scrutinizing the mechanisms and consequences of representation, such as ‘the people’ and the difference between “constitutive and constituted power.” Lastly, this approach also allows for comparison across political styles and provides a framework for investigating the relationship between populism and democracy.⁷

Recognizing that populism is a difficult and unwieldy topic to deal with academically, not only because of the lack of a general definition, but also because of its normative connotations and political sensitivity in public discourse, this Focus Section takes its lead from Moffitt and Tormey’s approach for the importance it places on mediated politics, performance, aesthetics, and how these shape and build political relations, as well as on Laclau for his interrogation into the emergence and political potential of the populist symbol “the people.” The contributions in this Focus Section are thus an attempt to provide snapshots of some of the ways in which we can think about populism as a political style and “the people” as a populist symbol in relation to certain political developments in various parts of the world.

Nicole Curato looks at the appeal of populist spectacles through her research on supporters of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and proposes ways to democratize political spectacles. Esra Nurgenc unpacks the performance of ordinariness and extraordinariness of leaders commonly seen as populists and discusses why using the lens of populism as a political style is useful in understanding certain aspects of contemporary politics. Meanwhile, Anna-Kathrin Oswald offers a lens to understand how

the us vs. them discourse is visually produced in the campaigns of the AfD, which she contextualises in a longer visual history. Lastly, Sara Abbas provides a Laclauan discussion of the emancipatory potential of “the people” in the ongoing Sudanese revolution and thinks through the potential intersections between populism and revolution.

More than offering settled answers to understand these political phenomena, this Focus Section is an invitation for further investigations into and challenges to the concept of populism. How, for instance, does using the frame of populism contribute to or limit our understanding of contemporary political phenomena? What are the (dis)continuities between contemporary populism and past political practices? How do the affective dimension and old and new media interact in shaping contemporary politics and political relations? What are the analytical, social, political, and economic consequences of labeling a leader, party, supporters, and movement as populist? Finally, what are the ethical dilemmas of studying this politically-charged topic?

Political developments across the globe necessitate a sharpening of our conceptual and methodological tools and demand ethical clarity, as we seek to understand “the lived complexities of political becoming,” to borrow a phrase from Mazzarella,⁸ in what is increasingly being referred to as populist times.

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⁷ MOFFITT AND TORMEY, 2014.

⁸ MAZZARELLA, 2019.