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Defining Populism and the Problem of Indeterminacy Some Conceptual Considerations*

CAMIL-ALEXANDRU PÂRVU

THE LITERATURE on populism has greatly matured in recent years, with a series of quasi-canonical studies¹ and a burgeoning series of fresh perspectives. Yet there seems to be very little chance that a specific comprehensive definition carries the day: the concept's difficult role is, after all, that of capturing a set of irregular, remote and historically unrelated political phenomena that have thrived in very local circumstances and have seldom claimed to belong to a global coherent ideological movement—and yet about which we have strong common intuitions: we all know what populism is, but when asked about it, we are still unable to adequately define it. This familiarity, coupled with the pervasive use of the term, further complicates the task: “populism” becomes increasingly a catch-all word, thrown in all sorts of contexts, and often used when naming names and trading accusations.

One dominant approach to conceptualizing populism is to see it through the lenses of a particular family, of a specific local and historical example. Such authors study a certain—more or less closely circumscribed—case study (e.g., West European populism in the last 15 years²; recent Latin American populism³; etc.) in all detail, and proceed then to integrate the main findings into the canonical theoretical treatment of the concept of populism⁴. The local phenomena under scrutiny help thus confirm, expand or contradict the general theoretical framework. Yet each time we try to extend this locally strong concept elsewhere (say, the American Tea Party; populism in Eastern Europe), we find it unable to include many such other relevant phenomena.

Another widespread approach is to follow the common, intuitive use of the word, and try to reconstruct, out of its myriad invocations, some common conceptual structure. Our own intuitions lead us to describe movements, discourses,

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parties, policies, mobilizations, actors, as populist, yet when pressed to give a significant common conceptual ground for such attributions, we run immediately out of relevant similarities among the different situations. We are quickly faced with an increasingly diluted common concept that frustrates the efforts to join meaningfully the distinct local rich elaborations.

These difficulties of defining the concept of populism are made worse by a problem of circularity: in trying to define populism by abstracting from the various local instantiations of the concept, we have to formulate simultaneously a number of determinate criteria for selecting the various existing cases that are to be included; but such criteria can emerge only from what may be common among those cases.

For many theorists of populism, the concept's notorious and frustrating elusiveness invites the use of analogies and metaphors, in the hope to better encapsulate, that way, pervasive intuitions that are inadequately captured by the current analytical apparatus. Whatever their analytical or methodological choices, it is hard to find a contribution that does not, in the end, assimilate populism to a (democratic) pathology, a specter, a syndrome, a cure, a malaise, an illusion, the present-day zeitgeist⁵, etc.

In this article I will explore some of the important alternatives for circumventing the powerful and durable difficulties of defining populism. One such strategy, borrowed from the treatment of the concept of democracy by Giovanni Satori⁶, attempts to escape the problem of conceptual stretching by using what he calls the "ladder of abstraction": abstracting from the various uses of the term, a common core is obtained by eliminating the features which are not shared by all its local manifestations. Yet, my contention is that what is left of the common core of populism, after this process of abstraction and elimination of non-common features, is too minimal, and ultimately unable to serve the purposes that theorists have when searching for a meaningful definition. In other words, the common core that emerges out of the "ladder of abstraction" is too indeterminate and cannot avoid the ultimate collapse of such notion of populism into either "politics" in general, or rhetoric. Such a minimal core is unable, thus, to sustain the function that a meaningful and determinate set of common features should fulfill: helping us to adequately identify the relevant cases of populist phenomena (locally and historically diverse) and to exclude the non-relevant cases. If a too-minimal core, as it emerges, risks indeed being unable to separate populism from politics in general, or from rhetoric, the more general definition of populism cannot stand on its own.

Another strategy, described in greater detail below, consists in avoiding the task of defining directly populism, by making populism dependent on another notion (for instance, populism as a pathology of democracy), and at the same time making the definition itself of populism dependent on the definition of that primary object. This approach has the advantage that it appeals to many of our intuitions, and especially to the present sense of a crisis in contemporary democracies⁷. This complex crisis can be summed up under the label of populism in a sense which is shared by many observers willing to find a single vantage point from which the diverse manifestations of a crisis can be understood.

Conceptual stretching and the minimal core of populism

IN A significant sense, the theorists' frustration is understandable: the difficulty of defining this concept stems from the sheer diversity of the phenomena that are commonly perceived to be cases of populism. There does not seem to be any authoritative definition that manages simultaneously to describe a substantive set of features that can distinguish populism from other kinds of politics, *and* to account for all relevant such cases. Each time a strong common definitional core is posited, a long list of exceptions necessarily follows⁸. Not all populist movements are of the right; many are of the left. Not all populist movements have a charismatic leader; such a leader might facilitate political mobilization, but is not necessary. Not all movements are anti-bureaucratic; many are pro-technocratic, searching an anti-political logic of impartiality/administration. Not all are focused on immigration; in many cases this is not an issue. Not all are redistributive: many are neoliberal. Not all are collectivist: many exalt individual responsibility and self-reliance. Not all are participative: many legitimize and count on indifference and absenteeism. Many attack a "politics of consensus"⁹ that benefits the entrenched elites; other claim to be the only reasonable compromising force. Many claim ignorance as virtue; other claim superior mysterious expertise. Some are urban, other rural. Some decry modernization, other blame the losers of it.

Conversely, the longer the list of relevant cases is, the weaker the minimal common analytical nucleus. Moreover, many still disagree about the primary nature of the concept and about its relevant tests: should we assess its consistency in the field of political ideologies? If yes, then what type of ideology can populism be, which are the common values, the main canonical programmatic studies, the common structure by reference to which the local phenomena of populism are the proper elaborations? Is populism, alternatively, a particular type of political mobilization? Sociologists can answer positively to that question¹⁰, yet from a political-theoretical perspective, we may still miss a clear conceptual consistency of populism. Or is populism, in the end, simply a political "style"¹¹? If yes, there still is a need to adequately conceptualize such a style in a way that does not dissolve the notion into "demagogy" or opportunism.

Sartori's notion of "conceptual stretching" captures very clearly the basic problem faced when trying to define a general concept of populism based on local and historically circumscribed, thickly defined instances. In a nutshell, whenever we try to apply a locally rich concept of populism to other contexts (what Sartori calls "conceptual travelling"), we are faced with what he named as "conceptual stretching"¹². The number of cases included is reverse proportional with the number of definite attributes that end up being included in the concept. It seems that in trying to define populism, we may face an insurmountable difficulty in achieving both comprehensive analytical precision and inclusion of the relevant cases. According

to Sartori, conceptual stretching happens when “our gains in extensional coverage tend to be matched by losses in connotative precision. It appears that we can cover more—in traveling terms- only by saying less, and by saying less in a far less precise manner”¹³.

Two important, but in their own way problematic solutions have been adopted in the literature by authors trying to formulate a general definition of populism in the face of the perceived “conceptual stretching” (as opposed to just analyzing a specific local variant): one consists in applying methods similar to Sartori’s own “ladder of abstraction” (but which leaves us with a common core so minimal that it cannot serve the prescribed definitional purposes); the other consists in adopting the language of metaphors and anticipating that they express better the shared intuitions at work.

The “ladder of abstraction”, as defined by Sartori, means the effort “to broaden the extension of a concept by diminishing its attributes or properties, i.e., by reducing its connotation.” Yet in some cases, “*the denotation is extended by obfuscating the connotation*. As a result we do not obtain a more general concept, but its counterfeit, a mere generality (where the pejorative “mere” is meant to restore the distinction between correct and in correct ways of subsuming a term under a broader genus.) While a general concept can be said to represent a collection of specifics, a mere generality cannot be underpinned, out of its indefiniteness, by specifics. And while a general concept is conducive to scientific “generalizations,” mere generalities are conducive only to vagueness and conceptual obscurity.”¹⁴

In the case of populism, the “ladder of abstraction” applied to the varied local elaborations and historical variations leads to a core conceptual content that is composed of two elements: a sharp *polarization* of people and elites; and a brutal *simplification* of the social and political space¹⁵. The polarization is at play whenever “the people”¹⁶ or a “heartland”¹⁷ is opposed to the idea of a corrupt, degenerated elite. Populism is made possible by the very ambiguity that exits in the notion of the people: the totality, and the majority. Populism plays precisely on this ambiguity, and singles out a particular identity that is elevated to the level of the people (as a legitimacy-conferring totality) to the exclusion of other identities and especially of the “elites” that fail to represent, and betray, “the people” thus articulated. In this sense, the polarization is simultaneous with an exclusionary identification of illegitimate actors that are themselves disproportionately represented by the corrupt elites. Pierre Rosanvallon also recalls the manner in which the people as source of legitimacy (as totality) and the majority as rule of decision-making tend to be conflated into the very common understandings of the meaning and nature of democracy¹⁸.

The second move common to all populist movements, as part of the conceptual common core, is the brutal simplification, the radical reduction of the complexity of social and political relations and structures. The promise to solve a long list of convoluted problems in 100 days, for instance, is a typical populist proposition. Forget the long legal and parliamentary procedures, if you elect me, a populist leader claims,

I will end corruption (immigration, de-industrialization, economic recession) in six months. Compromise, deliberations, complex procedures conceal corruption and preserve the privileges of the elites, according to the populist perspective. In reality, they claim, things are very simple, but the elites make them seem complex in order to discourage the people from taking matters in their own hand. Political decisions deemed by the establishment as being improper or crazy are exactly what populists claim to be very feasible. In this sense, the radical simplification operated by populists contains an important dimension of political radicalism: it conveys the idea of contesting the limits of political feasibility, of challenging the current accepted perimeters of options, the spectrum of possibility of political decision-making¹⁹.

Ernesto Laclau, in describing the logic of this simplification, asserts that populism “simplifies’ the political space, replacing a set of differences and determinations by a stark dichotomy whose two poles are necessarily imprecise.” Moreover, “there is in these dichotomies, as in those which constitute any politico-ideological frontier, a simplification of the political space (all social singularities tend to group themselves around one or the other of the poles of the dichotomy), and the terms designating both poles have necessarily to be imprecise (otherwise they could not cover all the particularities that they are supposed to regroup)”²⁰

The problem of this minimal core, consisting in polarization and simplification, is that it is precisely too minimal. It becomes easily a core of “generalities” instead of a conceptual core able to produce itself *generalizations*. In the end, all politics implies varying degrees of polarization and simplification²¹. In themselves, these two components fails to make any serious difference between populism and other modes of political mobilization or action. Any political articulation *is* a form of polarization and simplification. The role of a definition, however, is not to produce a conceptual core struck by indeterminacy. It is to offer, instead, sufficient elements in order to be able to include all the relevant instantiations, and at the same time, to exclude non-relevant ones. But if all politics is, ultimately, polarizing and simplifying, this definition of populism—obtained by abstracting, removing non-common elements from the diverse local rich families of populism, and hence resulting in this minimal core—fails to exclude the non-relevant elaborations.

This does not mean that there is not a case to be made that we live in times of a “permanent populism”. Indeed, many classical political positions tend nowadays to be reconfigured with an added layer of populism. Yet the idea of permanent populism is conceptually different from a notion of populism defined in such a way that it fails to help us identify non-populist phenomena. This all-encompassing dimension is obtained by elevating the minimal commonalities (polarization and simplification) at the level of a proper conceptual core. While possible for other notions, this move is unwarranted for populism.

An important—and partially successful—strategy to escape the definitional limbo is to suggest a limited set of ideal-type features of populism²². It helps identify relevant and exclude irrelevant cases, by selecting a number of general features. Ac-

According to Paul Taggart, populism is posited against the complexity of representative politics; it is based on the construction of a “heartland”, a symbolic place inhabited by the people that become depositary of the true virtues and values of the nation; it lacks “core” values and is hence very chameleonic, changing identity from one context to another; it is elaborated as a reaction to a sense of extreme crisis; it is expected to last only in the short-term: if successful, populist leader become part of the establishment and inevitably they lose appeal; finally, all populist movements are structurally dependent on charismatic leaders. From all these features, the idea of “heartland” as a theoretical substitute for “the people” represents an important contribution to the understanding of the nature of populism. As an “idealized conception of the people”, the heartland is “a territory of the imagination”:

*The commitment to the ‘people’ is in fact a derivative consequence of the implicit or explicit commitment to a ‘heartland’. The ‘people’ are nothing more than the populace of the heartland and to understand what any populist means by the ‘people’ we need therefore to understand what they mean by their heartland.*²³

This idea captures indeed a series of crucial intuitions concerning the construction of an idealized set of subjects, inhabiting an idealized space, hence easily opposable to the corrupt elites and their accomplices. Yet for all the multiplication of features, this approach can still fail to produce a conceptual core that is fundamentally different than the minimal core discussed above.

Populism as pathology

DESPITE THE analytical limits in defining populism and classifying its variations, there exist a number of resilient, very important and powerful intuitions that still need expression. Metaphors and analogies have appeared to be helpful: hence, the language of “populism as pathology”. This language allows the authors to convey both the shared intuitions and the sense of moral condemnation. It presupposes the idea of a “normal” state of affairs, to which populism is an aberration. Yet this approach relies precisely on such a presupposition being already defined or accepted, which is seldom the case. In assuming, for instance, that representative democracy is normal, and populism is the pathology, we tend to brush away the very complexities of political representation and the manifold controversies as to which precise understanding of it is more suitable in a particular context.

Moreover, by characterizing populism as pathology, we are then in a situation of defining it not directly, but as, for instance and most usually, democracy’s illness; this means treating populism as completely *parasitic*, in as much as not only is it supposed to be a bug of democracy, but its definition itself is made dependent on, or complementary to, what is perceived to be the primary object of inquiry (that

of which populism is a pathology²⁴). The nature, definitions of that primary object become the original sources for the characterization of populism, which is left, in this way, without a standalone definition.

To describe a movement as ‘populist’ is to suggest that it is in some way pathological or a danger to liberty without specifying what the nature of the pathology is. [...] Populism claims to resolve the problem of representation by conjuring up an image of a unified, homogeneous people. It radically rejects whatever it assumes to be inimical to such unity and homogeneity: foreigners, enemies, oligarchy, elites. With ever more vehement attacks it seeks to drive a wedge between the people and its supposed enemies.²⁵

Populism is thus commonly defined as a pathology of democracy, where it may act as a syndrome; as a symptom; or, finally, as a cure, a remedy. When understood as a *syndrome*, populism *is* the disease. It is understood as the very degeneration of democracy, the nullification of the proper mechanisms of representative democracy. Against a normal mode of democratic politics, populism corrupts, distorts, infects, and poisons the normal mechanisms and policies, as well as the meanings of the main democratic values.

When understood as a *symptom*, however, it just signals the presence of another, more important, disease (of democracy). It can, hence, be seen as a reaction to the failure of traditional parties to answer to diverse crises; a consequence of a massive distrust of mainstream parties and political leaders; a frustrated reaction against the limits of representative politics in general. As such, the important failures precede populist reactions, and are made visible by populism. As a marker of the grave ailments of democracy, populism is only one possible local manifestation of deeper and more pervasive crises.

Populism as *cure*, finally, appeals to the idea of remedy: in fact, it is said, we do live in “elective oligarchies” which are increasingly oligarchic and less elective by each day. Our societies stand in need of correction, and populism actually helps reestablish an equilibrium within contemporary representative democracies, by rekindling the promise of popular sovereignty. This argument reverses the arguments that point to the tyranny of majority or to the crowds, by pointing back to the oligarchies that nullify the logic of inclusive representation. A political leader such as Jean-Luc Melenchon, in France, might hence claim back the use of the label “populist” by rejecting its pejorative, moralizing connotation and purging it of the fear of the irrational crowds. The real aberration in contemporary democracies is not an nonexistent presence of the illiterate masses, but on the contrary, the unchecked and counter-democratic domination of the elites.

In a sense, the difference between the three approaches of “populism as pathology” lies in the shifting roles on what is deemed to be normal vs. abnormal, serious vs. simplistic, emotional vs. rational, honest vs. opportunistic, and the reversing of roles; at

the same time, the same dichotomy (e.g., serious vs. simplistic) can be rephrased and become a dichotomy between rigid establishment vs. innovative challengers.

But in the end, the language of pathology implies a problematic “healthy mode” in politics, which studies of populism not always address comprehensively. Many times, the “health” of the democratic mechanisms potentially infected by populism is taken as granted, uncontested and avoiding the multiple and problematic ways in which we can question the presupposition of an uncontroversial normal politics.

Populism and political representation

AN IMPORTANT reason for the pervasive presence of populism is, ultimately, the fact that political representation, a core feature of modern democracies, is an essentially contested concept²⁶. That means that there are multiple meanings of what it means to represent someone, yet they cannot be simultaneously realized. In what follows, I will review two of the main systematizations of the concept of political representation, those of Hanna Pitkin²⁷ and of Jane Mansbridge²⁸.

Pitkin identifies a series of different, irreducible contexts in which we normally use the term “representation”, and highlights the very distinct ways in which a principle-agent relation of representation occurs. Each “view is one of the several ways of seeing representation, each tempting because it is partly right, but each wrong because it takes a part of the concept for the whole”²⁹. At its very core, to represent means to make somehow present something that is not in fact present. As such, it is imbued with ambiguities and metaphor, and a context of predilection for inviting the radical simplification proposed by populism.

The *formalistic* view of representation is centered on the notion of authorization and accountability: “The basic features of the authorization view are these: a representative is someone who has been authorized to act. This means that he has been given a right to act that he did not have before, while the represented has become responsible for the consequences of that action as if he had done it himself”³⁰. The problem in the formalistic understanding of representation is that we cannot have, at the same time, both a very coherent condition of delegation and authorization, and a proper context for the converse mechanism of accountability. The different moments of delegation and accountability entail different and potentially competing logic of the principal and the agent.

Symbolic representation, on the other hand, suggests “that a political representative is to be understood on the model of a flag representing the nation, or an emblem representing a cult”³¹. We see ourselves represented by a sports team, by an anthem, or a particular architectural style. This meaning radically expands the sense in which something “stands for”, and amplifies the logic of representation but invites indeterminacy.

Descriptive representation appeals to the expectation that representatives ‘resemble’ those represented, as a mirror represents the object reflected in it. This meaning

is best instantiated in the various claims that parliamentary composition must mirror the larger society's social composition. An all-male legislative assembly strikes us as improperly constituted, when half of the society is made of women. The underlying presupposition is that those "like us" share our own interests and preferences, hence short-cutting the indeterminate forms of authorization and accountability.

Substantive conceptions of representation are, finally, based not that much of the question of who is a representative, but on what a representative must do. As such, here the fundamental differences between delegate and trustee, between representing interests or preferences, between the overlapping constituencies that a representative is simultaneously called to represent—render the nature of political representation extremely complex.

In an important article that builds upon Pitkin's work on the conceptual clarification of the idea of representation, Jane Mansbridge advances four types of representation³²: Promissory representation, the most common manifestation of political representation, is a classical model in which agents make promises during electoral campaigns; the gist of the problem of representation, then, is to assess the degree to which those promises have been kept or, on the contrary, broken. In anticipatory representation, the relation of the initial voter with the agent is sidelined, as the representative is already in a forward-looking mode, concerned to represent, rather, the voters that may re-elect him. Of course, when there are limits on the number of mandates that a representative can (successively fulfill), the logic of anticipatory representation is considerably weaker, but not absent, albeit in a modified form. Gyroscopic representation, then, removes the formal links of accountability between the representative and the voter, on the premise that some elected officials act not on grounds of prudential calculation, but rather on their independent, publicly stated, reasons. Voters are thus able to identify specific candidates that are displaying their independent commitment and capacity to follow certain values, policies, etc., without requesting the presence of other incentives than their own convictions. Electoral perspectives do not play a role in the formulation of those commitments, but in the voters end up confirming an electoral support for such candidates in the cases where there is a convergence between these independently formulated platforms. Finally, surrogate representation designates the situations where we representation lack the traditional formal links of authorization.

Each of the dichotomies involved in the various meanings of representation are fundamental and open to continuous controversies³³. Populism, with its simplifying and polarizing effects, attempts to reduce the intrinsic complexities of representation. By postulating a radical distinction between elites and the people, populists claim that the mechanisms of political representation, when acknowledged, are in fact simple and straightforward. Where Pitkin sees an inevitable metaphoric dimension of representation (making present something that is not actually present, *repraesentare*³⁴), populists aim to deny the complexity hiding itself behind the metaphor.

As a rhetorical acceleration of democracy, populism shares little patience with the real controversies concerning the proper scope of representation. Which constituencies have precedence? The local, the regional, the national? Shouldn't we instead abandon altogether the idea of constituency³⁵? Ever since Edmund Burke formulated to the electors of Bristol his own conception of the nature and limits of representation³⁶, representatives ask themselves whether to represent the constituency that elected them, or the nation as a whole. What of the idea of virtual representation, mirrored in Mansbridge's notion of surrogate representation? Under which conditions can it be said that an unelected, and otherwise not formally authorized agent, indeed represents a principal?

Furthermore, what should be represented? The preferences expressed by the voters, or their interests? In an important sense, representatives can be expected to work them out which are the considered interests of their voters by building upon the preferences voiced by them, but not exclusively limited to these. If parliaments are to be meaningfully deliberative, then the representatives are allowed to steer away from the task of automatic advance of the voters' preferences. In the famous words of Edmund Burke,

Parliament is not a Congress of Ambassadors from different and hostile interests; which interests each must maintain, as an Agent and Advocate, against other Agents and Advocates; but Parliament is a deliberative Assembly of one Nation, with one Interest, that of the whole; where, not local Purposes, not local Prejudices ought to guide, but the general Good, resulting from the general Reason of the whole³⁷

Populism has a tenuous relation with the deliberative dimension of the "golden age of parliamentary democracy"³⁸. Paradoxically, it simultaneously denies the conditions for deliberation and decries the lack of its consequences. Populists reject any liberal reinterpretations of a literal expression of the "will of the people", but at the same time claim for themselves the proper capacity and legitimacy in doing so. The delegate-trustee tension traverses the concept of political representation as well as that of populism. Populists typically deny the dichotomy, claiming to be delegates while acting as trustees. Again, the radical simplification of the political space is at work.

As pathology of political representation, populism is indeed marked by the radical rejection of the internal complexity of representation, and aims to restore the promise of an elusive direct access to political power of the people itself, to which political representation is only a second-best approximation. It is populism itself that, grafted onto the different elaborations of the idea of democratic representation, aims at eliminating the conundrums that make it possible. But ultimately, the same reason for which it cannot be a full-blown political ideology—the indeterminacy of its minimal conceptual core—prevents it from successfully decontesting³⁹ its carrier (conceptions of representative democracy), and helps it become a quasi-permanent feature of contemporary democracy.



Notes

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Abstract

Defining Populism and the Problem of Indeterminacy: Some Conceptual Considerations

This article examines several approaches to the task of defining populism. The important conceptual difficulties are produced by the apparent lack of a meaningful common core among the various local instantiations. Strategies to avoid the indeterminacy of a minimal conceptual core tend then to either appeal to the idea of “populism as the pathology of democracy”, or to associate it with the radical rejection of the complexity of political representation. This article examines the conditions in which the very indeterminacy of populism’s conceptual core ensures its quasi-permanent presence.

Keywords

Populism, populism as pathology, democracy, political representation, problem of indeterminacy