



The Cause and Retort of Populism: A Formal Political Reasoning (Politics) Without Distinct Ideology as a Response to a Political-Moral Crisis – Turning Laclau’s Theory into a Research Tool

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Introduction

With rare exception, academic definitions or descriptions of populism are seldom clearly false or totally inaccurate. At the same time, there is scarcely a definition useful enough to theoretically explain the universal cause(s) of populism. Moreover, many studies on populism do not present a clear definition of the term. And furthermore, and relatedly, explanations as to the roots of populism, if they are present, markedly differ and often seem rather country-specific, speculative or missing entirely in many of these studies.

In this contribution we go beyond the current lack of academic consensus about the roots of populism and, in a sense, go back to the older theoretical explanation of populism’s universal origins. This, in turn, allows us to understand and suggest a proper method of how to research the causes of populism, as well as to suggest a proper definition of it. Finally, this allows us to come not only to a general, proper theoretical and empirical research approach on how to study populism but, in effect, also to a blueprint of how to tackle the emergence of populism.

Thus, this chapter argues that research on populism is often marked by failed attempts to find some tangible criteria or common features that, ultimately, should somehow unify the roots of all types of populism. At best, this effort results in frustration among researchers in their attempts to identify such universal causes either on a theoretical or a practical level. Of course, some common external features of populism have been identified, such as demonstrating the central position of the people, being critical of the elite, perceiving the people as a homogeneous entity, and proclaiming a serious crisis.² In the view of Cas Mudde, the key distinction of populism is morality.³ This is, however, usually misunderstood normatively when populism is seen negatively. Instead, in our view, the morality of populism

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 - 2 Matthijs Rooduijn, “The Nucleus of Populism: In Search of the Lowest Common Denominator,” *Government and Opposition* 49, no. 4 (2014): 572–598.
 - 3 Hille Hanso, “Mudde: Populism Is Based on Morals,” *International Centre for Defence and Security*, May 23, 2018, <https://icds.ee/en/mudde-populism-is-based-on-morals/>.



should be used as a research tool. Andor⁴ seems to be right in pointing out that the key reason for the failure to understand populism might be that the generalizations of populism theory offer a binary analysis, while the sociopolitical reality is multidimensional. Moreover, it is often unacknowledged that there must be something missing in this or any other definition of populism – namely, a specific, clearly identifiable ideology. Otherwise, it would not be populism but something else (e.g., fascism or communism). However, those features of populism as identified by Rooduijn and others are more of descriptive nature and, as such, are further studied either at the rhetorical-discursive level, the ideational level and/or the political-strategic level. In fact, Rooduijn⁵ incorrectly separated the proclamation of a crisis from the core of populism and identified it as a consequence. Thus, even empirical comparative studies may bring inconsistent results. Yet the morality noted by Mudde and the proclamation of a crisis⁶, also defined by Rooduijn, actually fit together very well empirically as well as for the study of populism.

Be that as it may, there are in fact two overlapping groups of mainstream approaches to the research of populism: (a) a broad or thick ideology, a thin or narrowly understood ideology and a discourse or style and (b) the ideational approach, a political-strategic approach and a sociocultural approach. However, neither of these two broad groups of approaches offer a universally valid definition(s) for the roots of populism. Therefore, they are even less likely to be seen as trustworthy theoretical explanations of the proper method of analysis, and, ultimately, of its “cure”.

Yet, it is significant for our study that Rooduijn⁷, who has identified three key common features of populism, came to only two suitable definitions of it. The first is attributed to Mudde, although it originally reflects Laclau’s concept of “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups”. The second definition is “a Manichean discourse”. In fact, even this definition can be seen as a reflection of Laclau’s original idea and not significantly different from the former. Importantly, Rooduijn (wrongly) noted that neither of these two definitions include all the elements of the lowest common denominator of populism. It is argued here that this is a fundamentally incorrect conclusion. That’s why we have presented only selections of both definitions that contain their definitional core and, at the same time, show inspiration from Laclau. It is acknowledged here that Laclau’s concept of populism is, paradoxically, the least often used concept of populism, although it can also be seen as a bridge to understanding populism as ideology.⁸ In contrast, the promotion of populism to being seen as ideology, the ideational approach, is currently the most popular thread of populism studies.

With the aim of contributing to defining the roots of populism, this study accepts Ernesto Laclau’s late and slightly refined definition of both the roots and external features of populism as a formal political logic without predetermined ideological content. This definition is, although not acknowledged as such, in Rooduijn’s conclusions of his cited comparative study. Thus, Laclau’s original definition will be revised and updated and then compared with the criteria used to assess the quality and applicability of concepts in the social sciences. It is argued here that this definition fulfils the key criteria used to assess that quality and applicability. Contrarywise, the current mainstream definitions of populism mostly do not comply with the key criteria for this assessment. Thus, they cannot be seen as a universal explanation(s) of the roots of populism.

4 László Andor, “Against a General Theory of Populism: The Case of East-Central Europe,” *Intereconomics* 5, no.1. (2020): 21–26.

5 Rooduijn, “The Nucleus,” 593.

6 See Yannis Stavrakakis, Giorgos Katsambekis, Alexandros Kioupiolis et al., “Populism, anti-populism and crisis,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 17 (2018): 4–27.

7 Rooduijn, “The Nucleus,” 592.

8 Michal Kubát, “Úvod do studia populismu,” in *Populismus v časech krize*, ed. Michal Kubát, Martin Mejstřík, and Jiří Kocián (Prague: Karolinum, 2016), 14.



However, the herein offered and, in fact, well-known definition of the roots of populism provides a general theoretical explanation and implicitly suggests a traditional scientific method for its analysis. The major criticism of this type of definition has been its difficulty and impossible utilization for further empirical analysis of populism;⁹ yet, overcoming this methodological challenge is a surprisingly simple task. However, let us first focus on the fundamental problems with the concept of populism.

Defining the Concept of Populism

According to Freidenberg¹⁰, there are certain problems in defining the concept of populism. First, is *conceptual ambiguity*: The utilized term “populism” often does not define the exact meaning and the primary domain of the concept (politics, economics, psychology, etc.) and usually is not clearly limited in scope. In other words, Freidenberg argues that we do not know whether the psychological nature (uncertainty or fear), the economy (crisis, inflation, unemployment, relative or absolute decline in the standard of living), a political issue (primary mistrust of either political regime and/or political elites) or other problems are the mainstays or main manifestations of populism in different definitions or studies.

It is, however, evident that the uncertainty may depend on personal socioeconomic situations or perceptions of them as well as the blame attributed – whether legitimately or not – to primarily local, but sometimes foreign politicians for this economic situation. For example, Hofrichter¹¹ argues that the key to understanding the growth of populism lies in the global growth of income inequality since the 1980s. More specifically, research by Anduiza and Rico¹² suggests that the main explanation for populist attitudes is not the vulnerability or economic hardship suffered by the people, but rather the perceptions that citizens have about the economic situation.¹³

Thus, what if the conceptual ambiguity of populism is the strength and a typical fundamental feature of populism? In other words, populism may be caused by many factors, often mutually interacting, and sometimes actually contradicting each other. Moreover, it can have many manifestations. Still, there is something in common, as we have already suggested when citing Laclau’s definition.

According to the second critical point raised by Freidenberg, there is an *insufficient empirical definition of the concept*, namely its vagueness, with indefinite boundaries and reference points. In other words, populism means almost everything, and, as a result, the expression has no specific meaning. According to Freidenberg, populism is used within contexts of downstream definitions that are too slim and too specific. The definitions used are too general and difficult to use in empirical research. Each researcher has an initial intuitive idea with which he approaches this linguistic term, concludes Freidenberg.

For example, most contributions to conceptual approaches to populism, as employed in 158 articles on populism published in 14 selected political science journals between 1990–2015, actually do not fall among the four categories suggested by *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*: cultural, economic,

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- 9 See José Luis Berlanga and Jorge Ledo, “The Liberal Roots of Populism: A Critique of Laclau,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 10, no. 2 (2010): 51–182 or Kubát, “Úvod.”
 - 10 In Radek Buben, Vladimíra Dvořáková, and Jan Němec, *Que el pueblo mande!: Levicové vlády, populismus a změny režimu v Latinské Americe* (Prague: Slon, 2012), 122.
 - 11 Stefan Hofrichter, “The Economics of Populism,” October 2017, <https://www.allianzgi.com/-/media/allianzgi/global-agi/documents/allianzgi-stefanhofrichter-the-economics-of-populism.pdf>.
 - 12 Eva Anduiza and Guillem Rico, “Economic correlates of populist attitudes: An analysis of nine European countries,” 2016, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/308962315_Economic_Correlates_of_Populist_Attitudes_An_Analysis_of_Nine_European_Countries_in_the_Wake_of_the_Great_Recession.
 - 13 Iveta Pauhofová, Beáta Stehlíková, Peter Staněk, and Michal Páleník, *Súvislosti príjmovej polarizácie na Slovensku III* (Bratislava: The Institute of Economy of Slovak Academy of Sciences, 2018).



ideological and strategic. Many authors simply did not present a definition of populism, or they de-
scribed a conceptualization that was very unclear (see, for example, Kaltwasser, Taggart, Espejo and Ostiguy,
2017). Moreover, instead of many definitions or definitions based on formal “external” features, one needs a
definition that would be in line with concepts used in social sciences. We are going to discuss this issue
in further detail later.

Thirdly, according to Freidenberg¹⁵, there are *biases* in researching populism. In general, Yakov-
lyev¹⁶ demonstrated that the essence of the concepts of populism (following the “essentially contested
concepts” theory introduced by W. B. Gallie in 1956) can be contested on the basis of the ideological
stances taken by the contesting parties, as well as because of the choice of terms and methodologies
embodied in the discussion over the correct uses of such concepts. For example, Aslanidis¹⁷ identi-
fied regional bias¹⁸, policy bias¹⁹ and normative bias²⁰ in the study of populism. Sometimes regional
and normative biases converge. Carpenter²¹ offered a culture-based explanation for the emergence of
populism. Specifically, in his view, two types of political culture and institutions emerged, or rather
survived in post-communist countries – the “traditional” and the “civic”. Thus, legacies of political
subjugation and backward socioeconomic conditions allegedly led to populism, whereas more wel-
comed civic political cultures and institutions arose as a result of greater political autonomy. Similarly,
Kovács²² distinguished between pre-modern and post-modern populism. In his view, while the former is
characterized by a reliance on past values and was present in post-communist countries, the latter was
found in Western Europe to be more oriented towards the present, and its quintessential representa-
tive was Jörg Haider in Austria. However, there is a consensus and empirical evidence that populism
can be present in highly economically and culturally developed countries such as the United Kingdom
or the United States.

Normative biases can also be found as a major tool used for analysis of political party manifestos,
although researchers rarely acknowledge these biases.²³ Andor²⁴ explains these biases as a result of
the fact that liberals tend to dominate populism studies in both Europe and the US”.

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- 14 Pierre Ostiguy, “Populism. A Socio-Cultural Approach,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Critstóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 99–128.
 - 15 In Buben et al., *Que el pueblo*, 122.
 - 16 Maksym Yakovlyev, “Essentially contested concepts as a tool in political studies: definition and criteria,” *Grani* 23, no. 3 (2020): 17–26.
 - 17 Paris Aslanidis, “Avoiding Bias in the Study of Populism,” *Chinese Political Science Review* 2 (2017): 266–287.
 - 18 When certain perspectives that only benefit region-specific manifestations of populism are erroneously promoted to defining properties of supposedly general applicability.
 - 19 Where populism is reduced to an economic recipe that purportedly wreaks havoc on national economies.
 - 20 This relates to partisan assessments of populism’s impact on democracy, with the aim to denigrate ideological adversaries or celebrate favourites.
 - 21 Michael Carpenter, “Slovakia and the triumph of nationalist populism,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 30, no. 2 (1997): 205–219.
 - 22 János M. Kovács, “Uncertain Ghosts: Populists and Urbans in Postcommunist Hungary,” in *The Limits of Social Cohesion. Conflict and Mediation in Pluralist Societies*, ed. P. L. Berger (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 113–145.
 - 23 Kostas Gemenis, “What to Do (and Not to Do) with the Comparative Manifestos Project Data,” *Political Studies* 61, no. 1 (2013): 3–23; Mattia Zulianello, “Analyzing party competition through the comparative manifesto data: some theoretical and methodological considerations,” *Quality & Quantity* 48 (2013): 1723–1737; Wojciech Woźniak, “Programy polskich partii politycznych jako materiał empiryczny w badaniach dyskursu politycznego,” *Środkowoeuropejskie Studia Polityczne* 2 (2017): 41–58; Pippa Norris, “Measuring Populism Worldwide,” Faculty Research Working Paper Series, HKS Working Paper No. RWP20-002 (2020), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3541314.
 - 24 Andor, “Against.”



Therefore, we must confront the already discussed key concepts of populism with scientific theories and methodologies used in conceptualizations. Before doing so, the best way to proceed seems to be a discussion of the basic methodological approaches to comparative analysis. Comparative analysis in general is central to theory-building and theory-testing in policy studies,²⁵ and especially if it is based on analysis of socioeconomic phenomena in relation to their institutional and sociocultural settings.²⁶

Basic Methodological Approaches to Comparative Analysis

There are two basic methodological approaches to a comparative analysis of certain sociopolitical phenomena, including populism. The first is radial, while the other is classical – sometimes called the Sartori model. Weyland²⁷ expanded these two categories with a third category known as the cumulative approach. This latter approach or strategy is based on calculating together individual populist attributes. However, in that sense, it is redundant and is covered by the two aforementioned basic methodological approaches.

The classical approach assumes that the phenomena can be conceptualized based on defining features that must be fully present in each individual case. Weyland²⁸ explains this approach as *redefinition*. Przeworski and Teune²⁹ speak of a systematic-specific approach; in other words, it may be different elements in a different context that can be used as defining features of the same category. This approach is validated further by Wittgenstein based on the concept of family resemblance.³⁰ This phenomenon can also be observed in the social sciences. Collier and Mahon³¹ point out that in applying this approach, it is necessary to examine the analytical relationship between the attributes that make up the “family” binder to support its use in the given category. Collier and Mahon³² consider it always counterproductive to exclude parameters that cannot be applied to new cases. In essence, they are basically returning to Weber’s idea of an “ideal type”.

The radial approach assumes that all the definitive traits must be present in each individual case of the phenomenon. Weyland³³ calls this approach as based on *additions*. Collier and Mahon³⁴ indicate that it is possible that two members of the same category will not share what can be considered the definitive elements in the final measure. Unlike in the family resemblance pattern applied in the classical approach, in the case of radial categories the overall importance of

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- 25 B. Guy Peters, Guillaume Fontaine and Jose-Luis Mendez, “Substance and Methods in the Comparative Study of Policy Change,” *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice* 20, no. 2 (2018): 133–141.
 - 26 Linda Hantrais, “Contextualization in cross-national comparative research,” *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 2, no. 2 (1999): 93–108.
 - 27 In Kubát, “Úvod,” 14.
 - 28 Ibid.
 - 29 Adam Przeworski and Henry Teune, *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry* (New York: Wiley, 1970).
 - 30 This is a possible category of membership in some group, within which the members of this category do not share any common element, but we can still recognize members of the human genetic family by observing the elements which they share to a certain extent – unlike the non-members of this family who share only a small amount of these elements. The similarities are clear although there may not be one mere element that is visibly shared by all members of the family.
 - 31 David Collier and James E. Mahon, “Conceptual ‘Stretching’ Revisited: Adapting Categories in Comparative Analysis,” *The American Political Science Review* 87, no. 4 (1993): 845–855.
 - 32 Ibid.
 - 33 In Kubát, “Úvod,” 14.
 - 34 Collier and Mahon, “Conceptual.”



the category is anchored in the “central subcategory”, that is, in the best possible type or prototype of the category.

The applied or selected analytic-categorization approach is consequently relevant for the expansion of the given categories. In the application of the radial approach, expanding the secondary characteristics of a category may, paradoxically, outweigh the significance of the primary characteristic. As Collier and Mahon³⁵ note, it is an inverse relationship. Populism, as a primary category, should then be defined using a reverse mechanism in such a way as to include all the necessary and sufficient features so that it could not be disputed that it is always primarily about populism. This issue can be illustrated using the erroneous inclusion of radical right-wing parties that are using populist rhetoric among populist parties. Within this context, Rydgren³⁶ argues that the radial approach is typical for defining populism as a broad or thick ideology.

If we consider the concept of democracy or popular sovereignty to be closely related to the concept of populism, then it is the right direction of research, since Collier and Mahon³⁷ also consider democracy to be a radial category.

This approach would justify our understanding of dichotomous populist rhetoric based on a loose individualized or country, period-specific ideology (as broadly defined and conceptually narrow at the same time) of the nucleus performative *expression* of populism that has this key element in common. In addition, the classical approach will allow us to earmark dichotomous populist rhetoric based on a more specific ideology as rhetoric involving the manifestations of populism among primarily non-populist subjects, such as nationalists, communists or fascists, or radical right parties.

In other words, while the full-fledged expression of the populist subject is defined by the former sentence, the primarily non-populist subject is defined by the second sentence.

In practice, however, we see rather intuitive or mechanical attempts to categorize populist expressions – either the radial or the classical approach – most often in terms of searching for common features of populism on a performative level. As a result, many analysts remain puzzled regarding the many manifestations of populism, or they have a strict definition and categorization –methodological approaches that, on the other hand, exclude a large part of populist expressions.

Typical and Atypical Categories of and Approaches to Populism

We can illustrate the issue of confusing and misleading approaches to defining the core elements of populism through many examples that by and large reflect the performative³⁸ and binary normative aspects of populism. There are some bizarre definitions. Müller³⁹ divided the types of populism into “the good, the bad, and the ugly” according to the intensity of its expressions. “Good” populism translates complicated issues into a simplified form for a wider audience. “Bad” populism leads to negative political outcomes as a result of ignoring related or auxiliary costs. “Ugly” populism is characterized by all the negative features mentioned above and, moreover, seems to be defined by the search for enemies. Finally, in Müller’s view, milder forms of populism may get worse over time.

35 Collier and Mahon, “Conceptual,” 850.

36 Jens Rydgren, “Radical right-wing parties in Europe: What’s populism got to do with it?” *Journal of Language and Politics* 16, no. 4 (June 2017): 1–12.

37 Collier and Mahon, “Conceptual,” 849.

38 Defined as “being or relating to an expression that serves to effect a transaction or that constitutes the performance of the specified act by virtue of its utterance,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/performative>.

39 Henrik Müller, “Populism, de-globalization, and media competition: The spiral of noise,” *Central European Journal of Communication* 10, no. 1 (2017): 64–78.



It is clear that even though Müller introduced the definition of populism – composed of elements cited by Mudde in 2004 and of two communication elements – such a confusing and too artistic categorization does not help us to understand the phenomenon of populism.

Rydgren⁴⁰ surmised that social scientists in the recent past have applied three different approaches to determining the basic categories of populism. Indeed, these are currently the three mainstream analytical approaches: the inclusion of populism within what is known as *broad or thick* ideology, the perception of populism as a *thin or narrowly understood* ideology, and the perception of populism as a *discourse or style*. Significantly, Rydgren noted that these three different approaches are not mutually exclusive. Mudde⁴¹, as mentioned, merged both thick and thin ideology within the ideational approach, which is about ideas in general and ideas about “the people” and “the elite” in particular. Moreover, Mudde argues that the ideational approach to populism is the most broadly used in the field of populism today.

The third category (discourse or style) can be, perhaps surprisingly, found in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* as split into two further subcategories.⁴² The first subcategory is a political-strategic approach aptly summarized by Weyland⁴³ and defined as “the methods and instruments of winning and exercising power”. Then there is a sociocultural approach summarized by Ostiguy⁴⁴, who introduced a key dimension of differentiation in populist political appeals that he calls the “high” and the “low”.

We are not going to discuss the pros and cons of these alternative approaches or categories as it will be shown that they are less important for our further analysis.

Rydgren’s categorization – perhaps inaccurately or differently interpreted – is also found in Havlík and Pinková⁴⁵, who presented three basic groups of populism definitions. First, there are definitions of populism as a full-fledged ideology, but, according to Havlík and Pinková, these refer to populism’s manifestations in the nineteenth century. However, it begs for specification that the understanding of populism as an ideology is also found in recent works. In a significant shift compared to his previous work, Učeň⁴⁶ defined populism as a specific perspective on the nature of politics – as a special ideology. Perhaps more accurately, the definition goes beyond the second category in which Pavlík and Pinková indicate populism as a not fully-fledged or not completely fulfilled ideology in terms of content (*thin-centred*). According to these authors, this explanation is characterized by focusing on certain specific aspects of social life, particularly on the structure of political power and the form of the political process.

In the third analytical approach, according to Havlík and Pinková, populism is seen as a political practice or a form of political communication. Researchers who belong to the last group, for instance, Buben, Němec and Dvořáková⁴⁷, defined populism as a characteristic feature of democracy, and the difference among various populism types then lies only in the intensity, the use of populism and the

40 Rydgren, “Radical.”

41 Cas Mudde, “Populism. An Ideational Approach,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina, Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 44–67.

42 Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser Paul Taggart, Paulina, Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

43 Kurt Weyland, “Populism. A Political-Strategic Approach,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina, Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 48–72.

44 Ostiguy, “Populism.”

45 Vlastimil Havlík, Aneta Pinková et al., *Populist Political Parties in East-Central Europe* (Brno: Muni Press, 2012), 19–20.

46 Peter Učeň, “Populist Appeals in Slovak Politics before 2006 elections,” in *Democracy and Populism in Central Europe: The Visegrad Elections and Their Aftermath*, ed. Martin Bútora, Olga Gyárfášová, Grigorij Mesežnikov, and Thomas W. Skladony (Bratislava: IVO, 2007), 171–187.

47 Buben et al., *Que el pueblo*, 122.



goals of populist expressions. The aim of Buben, Němec and Dvořáková's research is then to explicate populism as a basic political and power strategy combined with an authentic reliance on the concept of the people.

Buben, Němec and Dvořáková⁴⁸ also specify that they return to the long-dominating structure of definitions and thus see possibilities for populism's analysis in three traditional analytical categories: as a concept (essentially "good" people against "evil" elites), a political style (linguistic shortcuts and simplicity) or political strategy (the method and instrument of gaining and exercising power used during elections).

The problem with the above division is that, as the authors⁴⁹ themselves acknowledge, "the political strategy includes both style and idea"⁵⁰. But, if that is the case, then there are only two fundamental manifestations of populism: the idea and political style expressed in the concept of populism, which should be used without normative-performative ballast (without terms such as "good" or "bad"). This normatively uncontaminated concept of populism is what Laclau calls the constrained logic of expressing populist demands. Baiocchi⁵¹ calls these demands "unvoiced needs". It can also be called the political substance of populism.

The Political Substance of Populism

Clearly, the political substance of populism is better understood when we first discuss not the performative-normative but, primarily, the political-moral aspects of populism. In this effort, a two-tier categorization of the core of populism, as proposed by Petkovski and Nikolovski⁵², is helpful. According to them, there are two contradictory approaches to populism studies: a dominant theory that sees populism as *democratic illiberalism*, and Laclau's *theory of hegemony*, which sees populism as a formal political logic without predetermined ideological content.

There are two important and related issues that we must discuss now. First, is populism always anti-liberal? And second, is there populism without a liberal normative-political framework?

On the first question, Blondel⁵³, Davies⁵⁴ and Orwin⁵⁵ argue that liberalism and populism have far more in common than is commonly assumed. Practically, populism is usually anti-liberal, but not always and not necessarily in a narrow political-ideological meaning. The ideology of liberal democracy became so self-evident and omnipresent that it lost, in many cases, its distinctive meaning; in other words, populism can occasionally be based on liberal ideology, but usually it goes against some liberal-democratic rights, or perhaps more fundamentally, constitutional human rights.

48 Buben et al., *Que el pueblo*, 124 et seq.

49 Buben et al., *Que el pueblo*, 128.

50 Kubát argues in the same way (Kubát, "Úvod," 15) – a political strategy inevitably includes a political style.

51 Gianpaolo Baiocchi, *We, the Sovereign* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

52 Ljupcho Petkovski and Dimitar Nikolovski, "Populism and Progressive Social Movements in Macedonia: From Rhetorical Trap to Discursive Asset," *Politologický časopis – Czech Journal of Political Science* XXIII, no. 2 (2016): 164–181.

53 Michael J. Blondel, "Populism, liberalism, and democracy," *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 44, no. 4 (2018): 353–359.

54 Will Davies, "The Neoliberal Spirit of Populism," Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, February 8, 2018, <https://www.wzb.eu/en/node/>.

55 Clifford Orwin, "Why can't liberalism be populist, too?" *The Globe and Mail*, September 21, 2018, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-why-cant-liberalism-be-populist-too/>.



Yet there are rare cases when populism is based on liberal ideology, at least in the form of liberalization⁵⁶. The analytical overview is complicated or confusing since there are sometimes populists who apply neoliberal economic policies, or at least there is a *neoliberal-populist* discourse.⁵⁷ There was over a decade of these policies in South America from the early 1990s until late 2000s.⁵⁸ All in all though, populism usually is anti-liberal by default as one of its features – since it usually emerges in a liberal democracy.

This issue is related to the second question – whether there occurs populism outside of a liberal framework. For example, some argue fascists and Nazi regimes are populist in their very fundamentals. This argument is supported by detailed analyses of the Nazi ideology, which was, at its deepest roots, best described as “nihilist”. In other words, it was actually ideologically empty or negative at best.⁵⁹ Eatwell⁶⁰ suggests that although populism and fascism differ significantly in ideology, the latter has borrowed certain aspects of populist discourse and style. On the other hand, populism can degenerate into leader-oriented authoritarian and exclusionary (but also inclusionary) politics. Yet there are differences between these two that will be presented later on in a table.

The most illustrative case here is that of *narodniki* or *narodnichestvo* from nineteenth-century Russia. Interestingly, its earlier interpretation was that of a theory advocating for hegemony of the masses over educated elites and represented a grassroots, pragmatic theory of democratic action.⁶¹ Arbuét⁶² claims, in a rather simplified way, that “populism started as a program and a Russian problem”. Based on this example, one can argue that it is possible to have populism in an illiberal and even undemocratic society. Yet it should be emphasized that some argue that the Russian *narodniki* was not an example of populism in the sense of the definitions mentioned here because it did not gain the support of the masses, and it tried to educate them on the basis of rational arguments.

Nonetheless, it seems more correct to claim that populism is a formal political logic without predetermined ideological content expressing some common political grievances and wishes. There is a crisis and a moral issue. In essence, there is a moral crisis of the political regime that is manifested as demanding “true” democracy but not necessarily arguing against liberalism.

Within this context, a theory of hegemony should be understood on an abstract political and not an ideological level (e.g., not as a leftist movement) that goes against any hegemony in a society. We will come back to this argument later.

56 See Ben Margulies, “What Geert Wilders and the Antilles can tell us about tensions between populism and liberalism,” August 4, 2017, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/08/04/what-geert-wilders-and-the-antilles-can-tell-us-about-tensions-between-populism-and-liberalism/>; Davies, “The Neoliberal Spirit.”

57 Matt Guardino, “Neoliberal populism as hegemony: a historical-ideological analysis of US economic policy discourse,” *Critical Discourse Studies* 15, no. 5 (2018): 444–462.

58 Weyland, “Populism.”

59 Dan Stone, “The Energy of Nihilism: Understanding the Appeal of Nazism,” in *Responses to Nazism in Britain, 1933–1939* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 17–44.

60 Roger Eatwell, “Populism and Fascism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Critstóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 436–459.

61 Richard Pipes, “Narodnichestvo: A Semantic Inquiry,” *Slavic Review* 23, no. 3 (1964): 458.

62 Camila Arbuét, “El populismo, una invención Rusa,” *Prácticas de Oficio* 2, no. 8 (2017): 1–10.



The Core Substance of Populism

Mudde and Kaltwasser⁶³ wondered whether rhetorical mobilization is a basic characteristic of populism or an empirical consequence of populism. As we have already suggested, the answer to this question is unambiguous: It is the basic characteristic of populism but, analytically speaking, it is not its substance. As put by Morgan⁶⁴, "Populism is best understood as an intensification of routine political dynamics." In other words, rhetorical mobilization can be associated with a number of emerging ideologies or a demagogue. This is a similar issue as that discussed earlier by Rooduijn⁶⁵ regarding the proclamation of crisis. Both rhetorical mobilization and a proclamation of crisis can be present, but they do not represent the substance of populism if seen separately. Both indicators can be found in any revolutionary period in history, be that the French Revolution or the Russian Revolution. However, we usually do not see either the French Revolution or the Russian Revolution as purely populist movements.

In any case, we are trying to digest the core of populism at a very abstract, deep political-ideational (not ideological, since ideology is more clearly defined) level. The main theorist within this so-called discursive group has been Ernesto Laclau. Laclau saw populism as a specific type of political logic – it may be better to use the word "politics" instead of "political logic" – characterized by confrontation with the existing ideological hegemony and which is able to divide social phenomena into two imagined camps, the power bloc (elite) and the people, via the construction of discourse. The discursive context in this way sees populism as emerging gradually.

In the first stage, various unsolicited requirements are combined into one central nucleus (later represented by the populist(s)), but it is possible that the nucleus may be – at least initially – a specific type of media, such as the Breitbart News Network in the United States or specific discussion groups on Facebook, generating a central nucleus one way or another. For example, for Italy and Beppe Grillo, it was his blog⁶⁶ that, for some time, served as this central nucleus. According to Laclau, the common identity of the whole group is created by defining a common enemy. We would change the concept of the enemy into the concept of a (political) "representative" or "negatively seen political adversary". Finally, the emotional connection emerges through a leader representing the people.

The problem with Laclau's original definition, according to Mudde and Kaltwasser, is that either populism is considered to be something ubiquitous, or anything that is not populist cannot be political. In our opinion, which explicitly or implicitly also appears in the work of most specialists on this subject, populism indeed is politically ubiquitous in liberal democracies although it is not always politically dominant or significant in political discourse or directly present in the exercise of political power. As put by Drozdova⁶⁷:

Two attributive characteristics of democracy (the idea of freedom and the idea of equality) generate populism, and the fundamental impossibility of democracy (as an ideal form) ensures its success. Therefore, along with the emergence of democratic thinking there is necessarily a populist

63 Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 9.

64 Marcus Morgan, "Cultural Sociology of Populism," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* (2020).

65 Rooduijn, "The Nucleus."

66 See e.g. Lorenzo Mosca, "The Five Star Movement: Exception or Vanguard in Europe," *The International Spectator* 49, no. 1 (2014); Filippo Tronconi, *Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement: Organisation, Communication and Ideology* (Farnham, Ashgate: Routledge, 2015); Martin Mejstřík, *The Five Star Movement: Grassroot Movement or an Institutionalized Party?* (Paper presented at the ECPR General Conference in Oslo September, 2017), <https://ecpr.eu/Filestore/PaperProposal/1122a087-0c19-4867-a260-df42f9628456.pdf>.

67 Tetiana Drozdova, "Популізм і демократія," *Traektorія Nauki = Path of Science* 5, no. 7 (2019): 1.



thinking, and the multitude of forms of embodiment of a democratic setting prompts pr
populism.

To simplify, politics and policies can be populist, non-populist and mixed, that is, with an occasional greater or lesser admixture of populism. Again, we should remind ourselves that we are essentially talking here about conflict and moral issues. Thus, when or why do politics become (more) populist? Sušová-Salminen⁶⁸ pointed to the problem of the fact that European generally cosmopolitan-liberal politics is understood to be a conflict-free sphere rather ignoring certain problems. This may result, for example, in populist nationalism:

Unfortunately, at the cost of also believing that consensus means breaking of the political conflict per se. Its central eradication from politics leads to the “returning” of conflict from the edges to its centre in a radical form, because it leaves the interests and demands of those outside of it to be ignored, leaving the space for today’s increasingly prominent political entrepreneurs with fear, nervousness and uncertainty.

In other words, when broadly understood political-moral issues and controversial issues/policies become ignored or seem to be ignored or are not sufficiently/efficiently tackled, then there is a problem of populist backlash. As put by Popov⁶⁹:

In crisis and transformational periods the actualisation of authoritarian liberalism corresponds to the fundamental tension between market capitalism and representative democracy. . . . Authoritarian liberalism restricts traditional forms of representative democracy, contributing to the reanimation of populism and political radicalism. The authoritarian restriction of representative democracy can lead not only to the strengthening of market capitalism, but also to the revival of reactionary forms of ‘new nationalism’ and illiberalism.

In fact, these ideas with respect to democracy were summarized much earlier by Sartori⁷⁰ who argued that protest behaviour comes from disillusionment with the real conditions and functioning of democratic institutions.

We will later show that the adjusted definition of Laclau best describes the nature of the emergence and transformation of populist logic/politics and cannot therefore be rejected. Given that the “minimal definition” (including the smallest number of definition features) is particularly useful in cases of very controversial and diversely understood concepts, it is clear that Laclau’s strategy is particularly suitable for defining and analysing populism. Within this strategy, the minimum elements necessary and sufficient to identify the case as the corresponding concept must be defined⁷¹.

Further discussion will show that other definitions and concepts explaining populism are less adequate or less useful. Before that, however, a discussion about conceptual issues in social sciences seems to be of paramount importance.

68 Veronika Sušová-Salminen, “Evropa a sebeurčení. První lekce z katalánského referenda,” *!Argument*, October 2, 2017, <http://casopisargument.cz/2017/10/02/evropa-a-sebeurceni-prvni-lekce-z-katalanskeho-referenda/>.

69 Maxim Popov, “Authoritarian Liberalism in Contemporary Europe: methodological approaches and conceptual models,” *Politics in Central Europe* 15, no. 1 (2019): 443.

70 Giovanni Sartori, *Teoria demokracie* (Bratislava: Archa, 1993).

71 Buben et al., *Que el pueblo*, 170.



Criteria to Assess the Quality and Applicability of Concepts in Social Science

Here it is useful to quote Gerring⁷², who summarized several criteria used to assess the quality and applicability of concepts in the social sciences: knowledge, resonance, economy, coherence, differentiation, depth, theoretical usability and validity, and usability in the field research. The problem with these criteria is that they may theoretically mutually exclude each other. For example, a definition of “economy” is usually opposed to “depth”, while “knowledge” may be inconsistent with “validity” (i.e., the ability of the research tool to find out what was intended to be detected). It is clear however that Laclau’s concept of populism, or more precisely his theory of populism, unlike other definitions and explanations, fulfils most of these conditions. It is noteworthy that Laclau’s theory remains either ignored, only vaguely criticized or only mentioned in passing by contemporary analysts of populism.⁷³

Laclau’s definition and theory of populism is relatively familiar, economical, resonant, coherent, allows differentiation and, at the same time, is sufficiently deep. It is also theoretically usable, valid and, ultimately, useful in empirical research. Indeed, it is a mystery why it is so often ignored in the research of populism. Perhaps behind this rejection, there is the original Marxist orientation of Laclau, or, more likely, its combination of simplicity and universality. In the next section, we shall explore why there seems to be a problem with Laclau’s theory in empirical research. It is useful to summarize these objections as a problem with utilization of Laclau’s general and, apparently, overly broad theory in practical social science research. However, we will show that this issue may not be a problem after all. In general, if the long-standing problem of social science is ambiguity, confusion and contradiction in terms of categories and definitions,⁷⁴ studying populism is the best proof of this set of drawbacks. This methodical problem was first discussed in detail by Giovanni Sartori in 1970 when he began to discern and brood about the use of concepts in new cases or even on those known in a different context (*conceptual travelling*) and the problem which arises when an old concept does not address a new case (what is known as *conceptual stretching*). Laclau’s approach solved this dilemma, as will be discussed later.

From Research to Theory

Let us first check in further detail the historical overview of how approaches to studying populism have developed in academic literature before the current prevailing consensus. Then we shall see that we still need to move beyond the current methodological consensus in populism research.

De la Torre⁷⁵ and Laclau⁷⁶ were among the first to summarize several meanings concerning the use of the term populism as a basis for generalizing *approaches to studying populism*. De la Torre⁷⁷ focused

72 In Buben et al., *Que el pueblo*, 167.

73 Mudde, “Populism.”

74 Collier and Mahon, “Conceptual.”

75 Carlos De la Torre, “The Ambiguous Meanings of Latin American Populisms,” *Social Research* 59, no. 2 (1992): 385–414 and Carlos De la Torre, “Populist Redemption and the Unfinished Democratization of Latin America,” *Constellations* 5, no. 1 (1998): 85–95.

76 Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory. Capitalism – Fascism – Populism* (London, New York: Verso, 1979).

77 De la Torre, “The Ambiguous.”



primarily on the analysis of South American examples of populism. According to De la Torre⁷⁸ populism is used here to define the forms of sociopolitical mobilization in which the “retarded” are manipulated by demagogic and charismatic leaders (a *political strategy*). The second use of the term populism refers to the designation of multiple social movements with leadership from the middle and upper classes and with the base formed by the people, that is, workers and farmers (a *movement*). The third use of the term populism refers to the historical period in the region’s dependent development or the degree in the transition to modernity. The fourth term refers to redistributive, nationalist and inclusive state policies (a *specific economic policy*).

The fifth use of the term populism meant a type of political party with leaders from middle- and upper-level social backgrounds, a strong folk base, nationalist rhetoric, charismatic leadership and without clear ideology (a *movement*). The sixth type of use refers to a political discourse that divides the society into two antagonistic groups: rural versus oligarchy (a *rhetoric*). The seventh type of use of the term populism refers to the attempt by the elites of the South American countries to manage the modernization process led by foreigners by putting the state in the role of a central defender of national identity and promoting national integration through economic development (a *specific economic policy*).

In 1998, De la Torre narrowed down the abovementioned methodological-explanatory approaches and identified only *three main approaches* to the analysis of Latin American populism and stated the methodological approach he preferred. First, these methodological-explanatory approaches included Germani’s concept of populism as a transitional phase during the modernization of Latin America, when populist adherents were understood to be easily manipulated masses (*the transition deviation*).

The second concept understood adherents of populism as a result of the inter-class alliance of the popular sectors – the middle classes and the new elites – against oligarchic regimes. The resulting regimes were authoritarian because they did not respect liberal-democratic standards and their social policies were popular-democratic (a *movement*).

The third concept was theoretically based on Laclau’s analysis of populism and empirically on discourse analysis discussed later in the text (*rhetoric*).

De la Torre’s new concept is actually the adaptation of Roberts’s explanation which understands populism as a failure of representative institutions to function as a mediator between the state and the citizen (*an outcome of a certain type of situation*).⁷⁹ It may be clear that the first and the last explanations are, at their core, identical, and they refer to *internal causes of populism*, while the second and third concepts are referring to *external forms of this phenomenon*. We will come back to this observation later.

Stewart⁸⁰ saw the possibilities of analysing populism in three ways: either as a system of ideas, a few specific historical phenomena or as a product of a particular type or types of social situation(s). Stewart’s approach has a weak point in the fact that these explanations do not exclude one another, but, on the contrary, they overlap. The first explanation does not distinguish populism from a standard ideology. While it is true that even ideologies are not ultimately consistent, they still represent a coherent and stable set of views, which is not the case for the majority of populist leaders.

From more recent work, Kubát⁸¹ considers Weyland’s approach to be correct, that is, the understanding of populism in the sense of politics; it is seen as the acquisition and execution of political power. However, it is not clear in what context should his populist action be seen as a specific or extraordinary

78 De la Torre, “The Ambiguous,” 386.

79 In De la Torre, “Populist.”

80 Andrew Stewart, “The Social Roots,” in *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*, ed. Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner (London: Macmillan 1969).

81 Kubát, “Úvod.”



phenomenon. For example, elections are a contest for the acquisition and execution of political power. The question of whether populism is present or absent.

We see that neither previous nor some relatively recent approaches are useful in furthering the theoretical development of research and understanding of populism.

Now we come back to Laclau⁸² who summarized his earlier approaches to the study of populism through four basic categories, three of which, according to Laclau, describe populism as both a movement and an ideology, while the fourth approach reduces populism exclusively to an ideological phenomenon.

Laclau's first analytical category regards populism as a typical feature of a specific social class that can vary in different countries and time periods (e.g., the Russian *narodniki* or the agrarian populism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). Laclau criticizes this approach based on the fact that these types of populism do not really have anything in common except that they are considered populist, which does not actually explain the causes of their origin (*a class approach*).

The second analytical approach Laclau called a type of *theoretical nihilism*. Analysts in this group consider populism to be an empty concept (as theoretical nihilism), which should therefore not be used at all. Instead, they suggest that research should focus on the direct analysis of movements that are considered populist, namely the analysis of their class structure.

According to Laclau, the class approach to populism (as well as the second, nihilist approach) to analysis does not offer adequate analytical solutions because the class of populist movements is very diverse and combines something that is difficult to define or even something that can only be "pure illusion or a mere delusion", and, despite that, this factor must be explicable.

The third approach does not regard populism as a movement but as an "empty" ideology characterized by hostility to the status quo, mistrust of traditional politicians, appeals to the people rather than to social classes or groups, anti-intellectuals and the like (*ideology*).

This approach is found, for example, in Učeň⁸³. According to Laclau, such an approach faces two problematic issues: The typical features of populism are presented in purely descriptive form and do not explain the role of the populist element in the emergence of a populist phenomenon.

The fourth approach presents populism as a deviation in the process of transition from a traditional society to an industrial society (*functionalist concept*). We have often encountered such an explanation of the causes of populism in the countries of South America and post-communist countries. However, according to Laclau, this concept is analytically the most consistent, yet it is rebutted by the historical experience of populism in industrialized European countries at the beginning of the twentieth century. We can also add that it is also to be found at the beginning of the twenty-first century, for example in the United States or the United Kingdom, see, for example, Kurtbağ.⁸⁴

Moreover, Laclau claims that "the experience with fascism is regarded as a *sui generis* form of populism".⁸⁵ Laclau further states that, despite the formal signs of modernization, a particular society as a whole may be more traditional than other societies in view of some of its features. Laclau asserts that the term "modern" society in this context loses analytical meaning. Laclau then characterizes populism as *a specific non-trivial contradiction expressed in a discourse that refers to the people, with the concept of people having no specific definition*.⁸⁶ Laclau introduces the relative continuity of

82 Laclau, *Politics*, 144 et seq.

83 Učeň, "Populist Appeals," 19.

84 Ömer Kurtbağ, "ABD'de Yükselen Popülist Dalga ve Trumpizm: Neoliberal Küreselleşme, Ekonomik Kriz, Siyasetin İşlevsizleşmesi ve Elitizme Karşı Bir Geri Tepki mi?" *Gazi Akademik Bakış* 13, no. 26 (2020): 135–164. However, Andor, "Against," claims that in the cases of the UK and the USA, there is essentially nationalism present, not populism.

85 Laclau, *Politics*, 153.

86 Laclau, *Politics*, 164–166.



traditions as an important explanatory element of populism, which, however, does not capture the essence of populism. What transforms ideological discourse into populist discourse is its peculiar mode of articulation of human-democratic interpellation.

Thus, Laclau's earlier definition of populism was as follows: "Populism is a presentation of human-democratic interpellations as a synthetically-antagonistic complex with regard to the dominant ideology". Simply put, "populism begins where the human-democratic elements are presented as an antagonistic option against the ideology of the dominant bloc". The word "antagonistic" holds high importance as it distinguishes populist discourse from discourse based on "differences".⁸⁷ Laclau ends his earlier analysis by claiming that "the emergence of populism is linked to the crisis of dominant political discourse, which is, at the same time, an element of the general social crisis".⁸⁸ It should be pointed out that Edelman⁸⁹ defines the crisis as the creation of the language used to describe it: "The emergence of the crisis is a political act, not a discovery of a fact or of a rare situation." In other words, *crisis may be real, fabricated or exaggerated*. This is an important suggestion which may help us further in explaining the flourishing of populist phenomena under relatively normal circumstances. Because of the importance of crisis in politics, especially in the news media, "crisis discourse" is an indispensable part of a policy and a particularly populist policy that itself arises from a deeper societal crisis or at least from a society that creates presumptions for populist discourse.

There is a reason for Laclau to be considered one of the most important sociologists of the twentieth century. Laclau could also draw knowledge directly from his life experience or from the experience of his native Argentina, which had been through one of the most traumatic periods of populism in history with consequences continuing to this day. Laclau later explained the logic of populist rhetoric and logic.⁹⁰ Laclau begins to draw his construction of populist logic using the term "demand".

Laclau distinguishes *the difference between demand and request*. If a request is not met, it adjusts to a demand. If there are many such demands, the legitimacy of state authority and the antagonistic relations between the elites and the excluded (or unsatisfied "applicants" – citizens) become more complicated. In the given situation, *a form of negative solidarity* can arise between different unfulfilled requirements, as all the requests are shared by the fact that they are rejected by the state authorities. Laclau considers this an equity chain that creates the preconditions for the emergence of populism. The equity chain has an essentially anti-institutional position. In addition to the primary institutions, the enemy may also be something else (e.g., the media), but, in any case, there will always be some enemy needed. Laclau then asks, who will represent all these unfulfilled demands? They should be transformed into a single request, which itself then ceases to be, but eventually becomes the embodiment of all other demands. This is known as the empty signifier. Populism then represents a political logic or action, a politics that consists of expanding the chain of equivalences and their representation by one element at a time. The representation can be almost anything, and as the number of partial problems/themes gradually grows, the representation of them all very often ends up being a charismatic leader.

According to Laclau, *populism is not everything that appears as populism* (i.e., not all the messages that have been said or promised during an election campaign), *but only what appears to be a constrained logic of expressing these contents*. In addition to this, political practice may not express the nature of social factors, but it can create them. The content of populism cannot therefore be found in any particular political or ideological content/context. It follows from this theoretical analysis that populism is not an ideology as we traditionally understand it – as a more or less logically coherent set of ideas and concepts about the proper functioning of society. It is neither a "thin" nor a "thick" ideology.

87 Laclau, *Politics*, 172–174.

88 Laclau, *Politics*, 175.

89 Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 31.

90 Ernesto Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (London: Verso, 2014), 180–191.



Nevertheless, it is possible to describe the core of populist argumentation in the Laclauian sense. This is described eloquently within the liberal-democratic context by Blokker⁹¹:

A particular set of populist arguments involves the absolute prioritization of the people, their (arbitrarily defined) political participation and their sovereign will, resistance to elitism and establishment, the demand for radical freedom and “direct democracy”, “defection” of the alienated people (where estrangement is considered the result of artificial constructions by legal-rational institutions) through the unification of the people with political power, coupled with dishonourable formal institutions and pluralistic representative democracy, as well as an organic and undivided vision of the “people”.

The discursive aspect of populist mobilization is also highlighted by Hermet⁹² – in a way that interprets social reality. Hermet also mentioned three other discourses: demagogic, fascist and communist. The table below, which is taken from Buben, Němec and Dvořáková’s book⁹³, clearly illustrates these discursive differences.

Table 1. Comparison of populist discourse with similar types of discourse

Criterion	Populist Discourse	Demagogic Discourse	Fascist Discourse	Communist Discourse
Relation to the People	Impersonation of the real people in populist discourse	The representative is a people’s benefactor	The leader controls the still imperfect people, who need to be changed	Turns to working people (working class)
Content of Discourse	Expresses closeness	Benefits are important, not the discourse	Hierarchizing, based on fascination	Indoctrination
Diagnosis	Reality described in condemning manner	The description of reality – real allegations are missing	Reality described in condemning manner but with reference to the people of the future	“Scientific” and abstract explanation of reality
The Nature of the Solution Offered	Simple, anti-political solution	Immediate benefits without argument	Demand for sacrifice and courage	A bright future – no immediate results
Relation to (Liberal) Democracy	The necessity of a fundamental reform	Unexpressed	Enemy	“A big fig leaf”

91 Paul Blokker, “Post-Communist Modernization, Transition Studies, and Diversity in Europe,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 8, no. 4 (2005): 503–525.

92 In Buben et al., *Que el pueblo*, 143.

93 Buben et al., *Que el pueblo*.



put by Andor⁹⁴, a politician who seeks support by appealing to the desires and prejudices of the people rather than by using rational arguments is a demagogue, although in journalistic or political discourse, this is often confused with the word populist.

Let us now turn to Laclau's general concept of populism which is closely related to the abovementioned rhetoric. Buben, Němec and Dvořáková⁹⁵ and many others criticize Laclau for his final conception of populism. These authors argue that it is too broad a concept. As such, it seemingly does not offer any operational criteria for the further analysis of populism. Specifically, Kubát⁹⁶ denotes Laclau's concept of populism as being of little use and, additionally, labelled it as the least often used. However, as mentioned, Kubát also claims that it can serve as some sort of a "reflection bridge" for understanding populism as an ideology. Buben, Němec and Dvořáková⁹⁷ agree with the importance of Laclau's concept in defining the measure of populism, but they also take issue with the absence of criteria that would differentiate the scale of populism (minimum–maximum).

We can presume that if Laclau defines the causes of populism's emergence correctly and simultaneously correctly identifies the essence of its discourse, it does not have to imply that he is also obliged to offer practical criteria for the analysis of populism (that is to say its empirical analysis). This is another task which is, to a large extent, normative⁹⁸. In other words, the acceptable scale of populism depends on its *negative impact on society*,⁹⁹ the definition of a context (who are the people and who are the elites), the *historical and local context* (who and what influences the level and transformation of populism) and on the *subjective opinion of observers or voters* (in what state is the people's rule/democracy, how do the people assess fairness in a society).

Turning Laclau's Theory into a Research Tool

Coming back to the previous issue, a more attentive reader can find the possibility for the practical empirical analysis of populist phenomena in Laclau's theory of populism supported by Rooduijn's empirical comparative research.¹⁰⁰ We have two key points here: First, *it is a general crisis*.¹⁰¹ More specifically, within representative liberal democracy, populism is the answer to the crisis of representative liberal democracy.¹⁰² Researchers should focus on revealing *the nature and causes of an existing general crisis in society*¹⁰³, crisis which appears to have been dealt with inadequately or not efficiently enough or remains unresolved, crisis which does not appear to have been articulated in public discourse and in public policies in the right way and with sufficient attention paid to it. Through this theoretical

94 Andor, "Against."

95 Buben et al., *Que el pueblo*, 149.

96 Kubát, "Úvod," 14.

97 Buben et al., *Que el pueblo*.

98 See e.g. Morgan, "Cultural Sociology."

99 For example, populists in opposition do not have to cause much damage and can even help serve as a corrector in a democracy if there is a captured state. Or, as Klaus von Beyme put it in "Populism Typologies in the Age of Globalisation and Post-Democratisation," in *Right-wing Populism. Springer Briefs on Pioneers in Science and Practice* 40 (Cham: Springer, 2019): "Right-wing populism can act as a barrier to right-wing extremism."

100 Rooduijn, "The Nucleus."

101 See also Margaret Canovan, "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy," *Political Studies* 47, no. 1 (1999): 2–16, Hanspeter Kriesi, "Revisiting the Populist Challenge," *Politologický časopis – Czech Journal of Political Science*, XXV, no. 1 (2018): 5–27.

102 Artem S. Abramyan, "About signs of populism," in: *Bulletin of Moscow Region State University* (e-journal, 2020): 3, www.evestnik-mgou.ru, Drozdova, "Populism," Baiocchi, *We, the Sovereign*.

103 See e.g. Blondel, "Populism."



analysis of populism. Nevertheless, *an in-depth analysis of populist discourse, including party or electoral manifestos*, is important. The importance of such an analysis is related to the previous point – it may help to reveal the nature and causes of the crisis in society.

As Cohen¹⁰⁴ puts it, “Anxieties about status honour and material precariousness in contexts of profound political, socioeconomic, and cultural transformation are key to understanding successful populist mobilization and electoral authoritarianism.”

Considering the abovementioned synthetic nature of populist discourse, a proper analysis must go *beyond* what appears to be the single most dominant discursive element. In other words, the roots of crises may be hidden in the most dominant current of the discourse. For example, as summarized by El Ghoneimi¹⁰⁵, who held talks on European issues with French citizens living in small French towns and villages: “Immigration and identity are real topics, but they mask other economic and social grievances that concrete policies can and must address.” It is far more important, in terms of understanding populist discourse to know and to understand exactly which themes a unifying populist discourse is trying to express. These topics may be ignored and/or suppressed in official public or media discourses. It is of lesser importance who is expressing them.

Thus, what is ultimately needed is a situational analysis, also known as situational logic. If Laclau speaks about political logic, situational analysis is how Karl Popper believes social sciences can generate falsifiable and, therefore, scientific hypotheses.¹⁰⁶ Situational analysis provides the means to specify and map all the important human and non-human elements of a situation, emphasizing relationships, social worlds and discursive positions. In situational analysis, the social world and collective commitments and actions of participants within that world are the units of such analysis. It is an approach to research that uses a grounded theorizing methodology to identify and describe social worlds and arenas of action and does so by representing complexity through mapmaking.¹⁰⁷

Proper situational analysis and mapmaking can help us see populism from a less normatively negative perspective. According to Schmitter,¹⁰⁸ the key question to ask is whether populism will eventually turn into an authoritarian movement or whether it will remain a democratic or, more precisely, a democratizing phenomenon, which, for example, may put forward previously ignored and/or even rather untouched topics. In other words, it is important whether populism can respond to sociopolitical challenges that traditional political parties do not appear to have considered as urgent problems. This was the case, for example, in Austria and even more so in Italy until the beginning of the early 1990s, both of which featured widespread popular disaffection and disenchantment with the established political parties, politicians and the political process in general.

Conclusion

It is argued here that populism is not democratic illiberalism but rather a formal political logic (politics), associated rhetoric and ensuing political action without a predetermined ideological content. Naturally, populism can take the form of democratic illiberalism (or illiberal democracy) if it emerges

104 Jean L. Cohen, “Populism and the Politics of Resentment,” *Jus Cogens* 1 (2019, n.p.): 5–39.

105 Schams El Ghoneimi, “The EU is under attack from the far right. Here’s how I learned to defend it,” *The Guardian*, February 6, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/feb/06/eu-far-right-steve-bannon-citizen-debates>.

106 Kevin D. Hoover, “Situational Analysis,” The Center for the History of Political Economy Working Paper Series 2016–17 (2016), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2736927>.

107 See Adele E. Clarke, *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory After the Postmodern Turn* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2005).

108 Philippe C. Schmitter, “The Vices and Virtues of ‘Populisms,’” *Sociologica* 13, no. 1 (2019): 75–81, <https://sociologica.unibo.it/article/view/9391/9197>.



in liberal-democratic societies, and it may most likely end up as so if there are no checks and balances available. Obviously, it opposes the backbone of a political system that is seen as partially dysfunctional. This conclusion was made possible using Laclau's general concept of populism. For Laclau, populism is a symptom of a deeper crisis that is expressed in the form of a constrained logic of expressing what we call specific populist rhetoric. The difference between demagoguery and populism should be maintained.

The universal content of populism cannot therefore be found in any particular political, ideological or geographical context. There are, however, some common features that seem to be universally associated with populism: a deep, fundamentally moral crisis as a prelude; an unrecognisable magnitude or urgency of the crisis as a condition; and manifested or performative features, such as old elites as enemies, mass mobilization, importance attached to the popular will or to the "people" in general, no identifiable ideology, evolutionary politics (if it is revolutionary or anti-system, then it is, e.g., communism or fascism) and, finally, a charismatic leader is usually identifiable. However, charisma is understood here as a contextual phenomenon; thus, without crisis, there would be no charismatic leader. A charismatic leader may be replaced by another central convergence point, e.g., an online news portal, a blog or a social network.

Moreover, to understand the roots of populism, research should utilize the situational analysis approach and thus focus on revealing the nature and causes of the existence of a general crisis in society that does not appear to be (in whole or in part) articulated in the public discourse and in public policies. Inferentially and paradoxically, studying charismatic leaders and other populist elements, however interesting and useful, is actually secondary to the analysis of the roots of populism.



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