

The Myth of Global Populism

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The “rise of global populism” has become a primary metanarrative for the previous decade in advanced industrial democracies, but I argue that it is a deeply misleading one. Nativism—not populism—is the defining feature of both radical right parties in Western Europe and of radical right politicians like Donald Trump in the United States. The tide of “left-wing populism” in Europe receded quickly, as did its promise of returning power to the people through online voting and policy deliberation. The erosion of democracy in states like Hungary has not been the result of populism, but rather of the deliberate practice of competitive authoritarianism. Calling these disparate phenomena “populist” obscures their core features and mistakenly attaches normatively redeeming qualities to nativists and authoritarians.

There exists a shoe—the word “populism”—for which somewhere exists a foot. There are all kinds of feet which it nearly fits, but we must not be trapped by these nearly fitting feet. The prince is always wandering about with the shoe; and somewhere, we feel sure, there awaits a limb called pure populism.
—Isiah Berlin.¹

I argue that populism is a misleading lens for viewing some major shocks to liberal democracy in Europe and the United States over the last decade. The goal is not intellectual demolition, but rather the resurrection of a position—call it populist skepticism—that has been overwhelmed by the rediscovery of populism by political scientists. That few scholars now seriously question the analytical utility of populism is a testament to the clarity of Cas Mudde’s (2004) definition of it as a “thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, the ‘pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that

politics should be an expression of the general will of the people.” Mudde’s ideational approach has allowed scholars to begin cross-national research on populism, identify at least two prominent subtypes—exclusionary and inclusionary—and hypothesize on populism’s relationship to both liberal democracy and competitive authoritarianism. Still, only a small group of scholars, mostly those who worked either on the European radical right or the Latin American cases of Venezuela, Peru, or Bolivia, engaged in such research until the last several years. Whether “populist” was the right term to describe any or all of these movements was not really a core concern within this small, albeit rich, field of inquiry.

And then the events of 2016—particularly Brexit and the election of Donald Trump—turned populism into a political buzzword on par with “globalization” or “terrorism” or “austerity.”² The Cambridge Dictionary declared populism the word of the year for 2017, academic and commercial presses rushed to deliver books on it, and research clusters on populism appeared at major universities worldwide. The American Political Science Association chose “Populism and Privilege” as the theme for its annual conference in 2019. Indeed, the existence of a “global populism” is now part of conventional political science wisdom and research has moved onto questions of concept measurement and hypothesis testing (Ackerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2013; Hawkins et al. 2019).

Much as I admire parts of this intellectual enterprise, my contention is that it is built on a flawed conceptual foundation. Specifically, the current expansive use of populism, and the tendency to see it at work in parties as diverse as Fidesz in Hungary, Podemos in Spain, and the Alternative for Germany (AfD), obscures what Mudde initially referred to as the “host ideology.” If it is true that “populism almost always appears attached to other ideological elements,” and if these elements are all “thicker”

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than a “thin-centered” populism, then the analytical value-added of populism is significantly diminished (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018, 1669). More importantly, it allows nativist and authoritarian actors to legitimate their claims by appeals to the general will.

The last decade witnessed not the rise of global populism, I argue, but rather the convergence of three distinct trends in advanced industrial democracies. The first was the political activation of race and ethnicity by radical right parties. In most of Western Europe this preceded Brexit and Trump by decades, and students of these parties had reached a consensus that nativism was their core ideology years before 2016. Neither general feelings of political alienation nor economic concerns provided much explanation for vote choice among radical right voters in most studies, whereas anti-immigrant sentiment nearly always did. Given both the volume of research on the European radical right and the clarity of its findings on nativism, it was unfortunate that some scholars ended up replicating debates about the degree of Trump’s populism and the role of culture versus economics in his political rise. Now that research on the 2016 elections has cumulated, there is overwhelming evidence that culture—particularly race and ethnicity—was the core of Trump’s appeal. Trump was not the product of a general revolt against the political class in the wake of the great recession; rather, Trump was the ultimate beneficiary of a long-running “southern strategy” fueled by white grievances that was pioneered by George Wallace and honed by Richard Nixon.

Unlike nativism, the second major trend of 2010–2020 proved to be ephemeral despite the enormous initial energy surrounding it. When the transformation of Syriza from a left-wing intellectual circle to a party of government in Greece in 2015 was repeated by Podemos in Spain and then the Five-Star Movement (M5S) in Italy, it looked to many as though “inclusionary populism” had spread from Latin America to Europe and thereby strengthened the case that populism could be grafted onto the left as well as the right (or even center, as the case with the ideologically inscrutable M5S). But most populist elements of these parties vanished within a couple of years. Syriza ended up enforcing the very austerity measures it had campaigned against. Podemos lost its chief advocate of its “populist strategy” following a split in 2019. The promise of direct participation in politics also proved illusory for Podemos, but even more so in the case of the M5S. The party’s online platform “Rousseau” became not so much a means for arriving at the general will as a machine to manufacture consent and legitimate the decisions of the party leaders.

The third major trend was a global decline in democracy, or at least the widespread perception of a global decline. By the turn of the twenty-first century, most analysts had come to recognize that the “third wave of democratization” had either ended abruptly or had never been very robust to begin with. What was novel after 2016

was a new diagnosis—populism—for the endurance of competitive authoritarianism in states from Venezuela to Turkey. Interestingly, it was the small Central European state of Hungary that became Exhibit A for the perils of populism, and it was Hungarian President Victor Orbán who emerged as populism’s master tactician. Yet it was not populism that eroded Hungarian democracy but the transformation of Orbán—and by extension Fidesz—from what Juan Linz (1978) once termed a loyal democratic actor into first a semi-loyal one until finally becoming a disloyal one. As with nativism and anti-austerity, populism was epiphenomenal to a deeper political project which, as has recently become even more clear in the Hungarian case, is best described as authoritarianism.

Nativist to the Core

In 1978, an unknown politician named Jean-Pierre Stirbois of the tiny French National Front ran for a seat in the National Assembly under the slogan “a million people out of work are a million immigrants too many.” Forty-two years later, the nativist message of the French far right remains the same. Following Mudde (2017), I conceive of nativism as “an ideology that holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group, and that non-native people and ideas are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state.” Neither name changes (the National Front was renamed the National Rally in 2018), nor epic leadership fights between members of the Le Pen family, nor multiple efforts to distance the party from its most extremist elements have diluted the fundamental nativism of Europe’s vanguard radical right party. Indeed, when Steve Bannon spoke at the National Rally party congress in 2018, he urged the NR to “double-down” on its anti-immigrant message: “Let them call you racist, let them call you xenophobes, let them call you nativists. Wear it like a badge of honor ... Because every day we get strong and they get weaker.”³ Bannon was incorrect in one sense: radical right parties were not really surging at the end of the decade but had instead shown, in the aggregate, a high degree of electoral stability since the 1980s. Consider these average vote shares for radical right parties by decade: 1980s (10.5%), 1990s (10.5%), 2000s (11.4%), 2010-2015 (11.7%) (Norris and Ingelhart 2019, 297). Bannon did, however, correctly identify the core of the radical right’s ideology. Whereas these parties have shifted positions toward Europe (some began as pro-EU) and have drifted far from their initial neoliberalism, their nativist core has not changed in the least. In this sense, radical right parties exhibit a remarkable ideological consistency compared to Christian democratic, social democratic, liberal, and even many Green parties who have sought new policy domains after their core ideology (environmentalism) became the political status quo.

When radical right parties first emerged across West Europe, many analysts were puzzled. How could it be that

parties whose comparative advantage lay in mobilizing resentment were emerging in some of the wealthiest and longest standing democracies in the world? Looking past rising ethnic heterogeneity and growing societal resistance to it, some scholars initially tried to cast it as a manifestation of rising political dissatisfaction in general, or what some German scholars termed *Politikverdrossenheit* (Arzheimer 2002). Yet the voluminous evidence that has cumulated since the 1980s demonstrates that political distrust—the ostensible motor of populism—is at best a secondary factor to attitudes toward immigration. As Arzheimer (2017) summarizes: “The vast majority of their voters support the radical right because of their anti-immigrant claims and demands, and their sense of frustration and distrust may very well result from their political preferences on immigration not being heeded by the mainstream parties.” A second hypothesis on the rise of the European extreme right, one first made by Piero Ignazi (1992) and recently resuscitated by Norris and Ingelhart (2019), argued that the spread of post-materialist values and the political success of the new left had provoked a “silent-counterrevolution” among voters who were attracted to the radical right’s defense of supposedly traditional values. But evidence for this proposition has been weak as well, because, again according to Arzheimer (2017): “one way or the other, for many RRP voters in Western Europe, homophobia and social conservatism do not seem to matter too much anymore.”

The central debate over the rise of the radical right was between proponents of the “losers of modernization” and the “cultural backlash” theses. The former view economic change as fundamental while the latter understand cultural backlash primarily as anti-immigrant sentiment. I agree with Mudde and Kaltwasser’s (2018, 1673) assessment that there is no need to recapitulate this debate given that it “was decided decades ago (in favor of cultural backlash.)” Suffice to say that even the most skillful efforts at injecting political economy into radical right voting have consistently failed to demonstrate the centrality of economic anxiety, or the character of the welfare state, or the construction of a winning formula that combines neo-liberal economic preferences with authoritarian cultural values (Art 2011). Elisabeth Ivarsflaten’s (2008) finding that the only grievances that all successful radical right parties (in Western Europe) mobilize are those over immigration remains valid today.

Tellingly, the greatest economic downturn since the Great Depression did not lead to a dramatic increase in radical right support, as most economic theories would predict. The sovereign debt crisis, however, did spawn a new radical right party in Germany in the form of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in 2013. Founded by a professor of economics, the AfD sought a return to the deutschmark and an end to the EU bailouts that Chancellor Angela Merkel had grudgingly approved. For a

moment, it appeared that a party to the right of the CDU/CSU would succeed by concentrating on economics and jettisoning the cultural nativism that had doomed every other radical right party in postwar Germany. Yet even before millions of Syrian refugees sought asylum in Europe in 2015–2016, the AfD’s party leadership was captured by a resurgent nativist wing in July 2015 under Frauke Petry. And when Merkel opened up Germany to Syrian refugees, the AfD pivoted to a relentlessly anti-immigrant message that helped it perform well in numerous state elections before eventually winning 12.6% of the national vote in 2017, making it the first radical right party in postwar Germany to gain representation in the lower house (Bundestag). It was thus a shock when Petry left the party the day after the election: machinations by an even more extremist wing had eroded her internal support. By June of 2020, two state branches of the AfD (Brandenburg and Thuringia) were under the surveillance of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, as they were ruled to be “fighting against the free democratic order.” The AfD is thus better understood as a party of the refugee crisis—specifically, Merkel’s response to it—even though its origins lie in the politics of the great recession (Art 2019).

As by far the most researched party family in Europe, scholars had come to learn a great deal about the radical right parties and their voters. It was unfortunate that this knowledge did not prevent a repetition of the “culture versus economics” debate about the political rise of Donald Trump. Rather than looking toward the radical right in contemporary Europe, an initial wave of academic literature and political journalism sought instead to place Trump in an American populist tradition.

Of the possible precursors to Trump, none received as much attention as George Wallace, the former governor of Alabama (1963–1967, 1971–1979, 1983–1987) and the last politician before Ross Perot to launch a credible third-party presidential challenge in 1968. In fact, it was in the wake of Perot’s first presidential run in 1992 that both Wallace and populism received a bump in intellectual attention. Stephen Leshner’s authorized biography *George Wallace: American Populist* was published in 1995, and Michael Kazin’s *The Populist Persuasion* that appeared the same year includes a lengthy chapter on Wallace. As Alan Brinkley (1994) noted in his book review, Leshner’s thesis was that a “broad populist message, much more than its racist mutation, was responsible for Governor Wallace’s extraordinary success in national politics.” Two decades later, Rich Lowry traced a direct populist line from Wallace to Trump: “What you hear in Trump, and Wallace before him, is the authentic voice of American populism, lurid and outraged, crude and entertaining, earthy and evocative” (Lowry, 2016).

Recent analyses of populism by John Judis (2016) and Jan-Werner Müller (2016) draw on Leshner’s portrait of

Wallace to make similar arguments to Lowry. Judis writes that “Wallace emphasized his opposition to radical integration, but he framed it as a defense of the average (white) American against the tyranny of Washington bureaucrats” (34). Wallace, Judis notes, routinely railed against the “pointy-headed intellectuals” that were, in his view, creating a new oligarchy under the guise of a revamped liberalism. He quotes selections of Wallace’s 1967 campaign interview on *Meet the Press*:

There’s a backlash against big government in this country. This is a movement of the people And I think that if the politicians get in the way a lot of them are going to get run over by this average man in the street—this man in the textile mill, this man in the steel mill, this barber, this beautician, the policeman on the beat . . . the little businessman. (Judis, 34)

Müller similarly describes Wallace as the first important American populist of the postwar era. Wallace, he writes, spoke about “real Americans,” wore cheap suits, and claimed to put ketchup on everything (Müller 2016, 40, 80, 83–83, 91). Wallace’s inaugural address as governor of Alabama, Müller argues, was also populist: “In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod the earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny.” Müller writes that “the rhetoric that revealed Wallace to be a populist centered on his claim exclusively to speak “in the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth” (21).

But not all scholars consider Wallace a populist. Norris and Ingelhart (2019, 3) label the Wallace phenomenon a “white backlash,” which I argue later is the proper term. The reason is simple: Wallace’s populism was always epiphenomenal to his racism. Consider the lines directly after Wallace’s invocation of the “greatest people that have ever trod the earth:” they are: “segregation now . . . segregation tomorrow . . . segregation forever.” Relying on Leshner’s biography for material on Wallace is problematic in two senses. First, any authorized biography is likely to downplay the worst features of its subject, so it is not shocking that Wallace would want to have his racism recast as populism. Second, Wallace was a rare politician who recanted racism and sought forgiveness. He apologized personally to African Americans for his prior views and words, appointed more to state government positions than any previous governor, and overwhelmingly won the black vote in 1983 on his way to a fourth term as governor. But this later reinvention cannot—and should not—diminish the centrality of race in Wallace’s political rise. For as Brinkley (1994) argued in his review of Leshner’s biography: “Mr. Leshner overstates his case. Governor Wallace’s message was never a purely racist one, but at the height of his powers he drew his strength almost entirely from white anxieties about integration.”

Elected a state circuit judge in 1952, Wallace made a name for himself by resisting federal efforts to remove

segregation signs in public places and by threatening to arrest any FBI agent who exposed the racial makeup of Southern grand juries. He broke with his political protégé Governor James “Big Jim” Folsom in 1956 because, according to Wallace, he had always been “soft on the [original racial slur omitted] question” (quoted in Kazin 1995, 230). Moreover, Wallace was always clear in his own mind about the role that race played in his political ascent. After losing the gubernatorial race in 1958 to state Attorney General John Patterson, who was endorsed by the KKK, Wallace concluded: “Well, boys, no other son-of-a-bitch will ever out [racial slur omitted] me again” (Carter 1995, 96). In the next campaign, which he won, Wallace confessed that he “started off talking about school and highways and prisons and taxes—and I couldn’t make them listen. Then I began talking about [racial slur omitted]—and they stomped the floor” (Carter 1995, 109).

Some of Wallace’s language might look populist at first blush, but further inspection reveals that his populism derived from his racism. Consider this rambling answer that Wallace gave to a journalist in response to a question about the defining issues of the upcoming 1968 election:

Schools, that’ll be one thing. By the fall of 1968, the people of Cleveland and Chicago and Gary and St. Louis will be so God-damned sick and tired of Federal interference in their local schools, they’ll be ready to vote Wallace by the thousand. The people don’t like this triflin’ with their children, tellin’ ‘em which teachers to have to teach in which schools, and bussing [sic] little boys and girls half across a city jus’ to achieve ‘the proper racial mix.’ . . . I’ll give you another big one for 1968: law and order. Crime in the streets. The people are going to be fed up with the sissy attitude of Lyndon Johnson and all the intellectual morons and theoreticians he has around him. They’re fed up with a Supreme Court that . . . It’s a sorry, lousy, no-account outfit . . . Folks won’t stand for it. (quoted in Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2004, 66)

Although Wallace only mentions race directly once in this answer (when he decries the goal of a “proper racial mix”), race actually pervades his response. Clearly, his defense of local and state rights against federal interference is based in race, but so too is his invocation of “law and order” as well as his criticism of the Supreme Court. The immediate historical context matters; national media coverage of the Watts riots in 1965 and other events raised fears of a black criminal class among white audiences. “Law and Order” was thus a racially coded message from its inception. The Supreme Court—which at the time was the “liberal” court of Chief Justice Warren—drew Wallace’s ire primarily for its defense of racial equality and for landmark cases like *Miranda* that cut against the law and order agenda.

Like Wallace, Trump based his campaign on racial resentment. He was, after all, the most vocal advocate of “birtherism” and began his campaign by calling Mexicans rapists. It was thus surprising that many analysts viewed

Trump with a populist rather than nativist lens. Analyzing campaign rhetoric before the November election, Oliver and Rahn (2016) argued that “the year 2016 is indeed the year of the populist, and Donald Trump is its apotheosis” (190). Immediately after Trump’s victory, pundits and scholars analyzed how and why he had won the “white working class.” Economic decline and political distrust emerged as the primary explanatory variables for some scholars (Gest 2016; Morgan and Lee 2018). To be sure, no credible analyst was arguing that Trump was not a nativist, but rather that his nativism was just a part of his populist profile.

Four years later, we have overwhelming evidence that racial resentment and anti-immigration attitudes were the most important factor in Trump’s electoral success (Donavan and Redlawsk 2018; Mutz 2018; Redlawsk et al. 2018; Reny, Collingwood, and Valenzuela 2019; Schaffner, Macwilliams, and Nteta 2018; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018; Lajevardi and Abrajano, 2019.)” As Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck (2018, 156) conclude: “No other factor appeared as distinctly powerful in 2016, compared to prior elections, as attitudes about racial issues and immigration and no other factor explained the diploma divide among whites as fully.” By contrast, nearly every study finds that personal economic conditions had, at best, a modest effect on vote (Schaffner, Macwilliams, and Nteta 2018; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018; Reny, Collingwood, and Valenzuela 2019; Rudolph 2019). Median household income was not related to support for Trump. Nor was it the case that economics led voters to scapegoat immigrants, confirming previous research that personal economic fortunes are not good predictors of individual attitudes on immigration (Hainmuller and Hopkins 2014).

What about the role of political dissatisfaction? In his critique of Mutz (2018), Stephen Morgan (2018) claims that rising economic inequality colored perceptions of Trump among the white working class. Specifically:

Many voters recognized their own stagnant economic fortunes, borne of an age of gross inequality not seen in decades, and welcomed by a highly educated elite no longer shy of its own conspicuous consumption ... It may be puzzling to see a billionaire as a savior for the fortunes of such voters, but its far less puzzling if, as a bombastic outsider candidate claiming to fund his own campaign, he was a beneficiary of their desire for a transgressive moment of protest. (14)

But despite its plausibility and ubiquity in pundit commentary, the protest thesis finds little empirical support. Hooghe and Dassonville (2018) demonstrate that the Trump vote cannot be explained by lack of trust in politics or a low level of satisfaction with democracy, but rather by anti-immigrant sentiment and racial resentment. “Although the rhetoric about ‘draining the swamp’ (of bureaucracy in Washington DC) received ample media attention,” they write, “our analysis suggests that it was not

a major voting motive for Trump voters (532).” Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck (2018, 74) similarly conclude that “Trump did not benefit much from any belief that ordinary people had little ability to influence politics” and that “measures of political and economic dissatisfaction were not linked to support for Trump.” They also find “little apparent relationship between support for Trump and distrust of government” (92). Norris and Inglehart (2019, 458) reason that populist “attitudes were so broadly shared in the American electorate that Clinton voters did not differ from Trump supporters in their distaste for politicians.”

Developments since November 2016 have only strengthened the case that Trump is a nativist first and foremost. He succeeded in making the 2018 midterms about “Caravans and Kavanaugh,” although his focus on race and sex backfired electorally (Schaffner 2020). Nowhere has the Trump administration scored as many policy victories as in immigration, and Trump’s political comfort zone clearly lies in stoking racial and ethnic animosity at every possible turn. He has openly supported radical right politicians across Europe, as one might expect from the first radical right president in American history.

Before 2016, it was really an academic debate whether radical right parties were populist or not. Since there was a nearly perfect overlap between “populist parties” and radical right ones, scholars were comfortable referring to the same phenomenon by different terms. But the explosion of the global populist narrative has made it more important to highlight the core features of these parties, as several scholars have recently done. I share Jens Rydgren’s (2017) view that “these parties are mainly defined by ethnic nationalism, and not a populist ideology.” Mudde makes a similar point in a 2017 column in *The Guardian* titled “Why Nativism, Not Populism, Should Be Declared Word of the Year.” “Within the core ideology of the popular radical right,” he writes, “populism comes secondary to nativism, and within contemporary European and US politics, populism functions at best as a fuzzy blanket to camouflage the nastier nativism.”

Anti-Austerity Politics Meets the Iron Law of Oligarchy

The second major subtype of populism—inclusionary populism—was long considered exclusive to Latin America. As Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013, 167) noted: “Latin American populism predominantly has a socio-economic dimension (including the poor) while European populism has a primarily sociocultural dimension (excluding the ‘aliens’).” Their conclusion reflected the empirical fact that inclusionary or “left-wing populism” was close to an empty cell. Before the Eurozone crisis, the only significant candidate for membership was the German *Die Linke*.⁴ Yet even this case was complicated as the party was the direct descendent of the Party of Democratic Socialism

(PDS), which was in turn the successor party to the SED that controlled the East German state from 1949–1990. In any event, there was not a big academic debate about left-wing populism in Europe before the financial crisis as most of these parties were electorally insignificant.

The rise first of Syriza, and then of Podemos and the Five Star Movement (M5S), made it look like populism had suddenly taken an inclusionary form. While Norris and Ingelhart (2019, 240) refer to these three parties (along with Die Linke) as Libertarian populist parties, a consensus quickly emerged that they were in fact left-wing, inclusionary populists. Class replaced ethnicity in their construction of the people versus the elite, and they embraced the “ninety-nine percent” language of the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States. It was not a coincidence that all three parties emerged in three of the states hardest hit by the sovereign debt crisis and the resulting politics of austerity. All three parties were in favor of using state power against international market forces and the dictates of the despised “troika” of the EU Commission, IMF, and the European Central Bank.

Now these positions are all consistent with far left and even classic social democratic ideology. For as Luke March (2016) notes, “many of these policies are less radical than those promoted by formerly mainstream Keynesian social democrats” (5). Regarding Podemos: “most of its electoral program is indiscernible from that of the traditional alternative left: restructuring of foreign debt, tax reform, progressive state in the economy, women’s rights” (Sola and Rendueles 2018, 104). Pablo Iglesias, leader of Podemos, admitted as much in 2015 in a wide-ranging article in the *New Left Review*: “We are not opposing a strategy for a transition to socialism, but we are being more modest and adopting a neo-Keynesian approach ... calling for higher investment, securing social rights and redistribution” (27). Given their roots in communist or post-communist parties, coupled with their rejection of globalization and neoliberalism, one wonders what “populism” adds to this already thick ideological profile?

I next consider three possible connections to populism. The first is that these parties genuinely acted on the general will and against the elites that were enforcing the austerity measures. This was Syriza’s central claim. The second is that leaders of these parties were explicitly committed to a set of theoretical propositions about populism tied to Ernesto Laclau and related to their experiences with Latin American variants, primarily Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales. This was really only the case with Podemos. The third is that novel organizational methods—particularly online platforms—were truly putting power in the hands of the people and achieving new levels of internal party democracy. Podemos tried this to a certain extent (Syriza did not), but it was above all the M5S that tried to revolutionize Italian politics through the internet.

Beginning with the Greek case, Syriza was founded as a coalition of radical left parties in 2004, the largest of which was the communist Synaspismos. Unlike in Spain, where the Indignados movement resulted directly in the foundation of a new leftist party (Podemos), Syriza predated the spontaneous social opposition to austerity. Its anti-neoliberal and counter-globalization positions were thus developed at a time when Greece was ostensibly benefiting from its adoption of the euro. Yet Syriza and its young leader Alexei Tsipras were virtually unknown within Greece before the Greek government announced in December 2009 that its annual budget deficit was not 3%, as per Eurozone regulations, but rather 15%. This admission upended Greek politics and marked the beginning of its decade-long saga with the “troika” that was charged with managing Greece’s debt without destroying the euro in the process. Syriza benefitted electorally from this dynamic because “Syriza was the only party that managed to articulate an alternative to austerity” (Katsambekis 2016, 399).

Yet Syriza ended up doing precisely the opposite. After elections in January 2015, Syriza formed a government with an ostensible mandate to fight the troika at every turn. As tensions mounted and international markets braced for a Grexit, Tsipras launched a referendum on whether or not Greece should accept the troika’s latest package of bailout terms. Greeks voted no by a margin of 61% to 39% on July 5, 2015, but Tsipras nevertheless signed onto an even harsher set of terms a mere days later. As the *Economist* noted, “Mr. Tsipras has performed the most remarkable volte-face in recent European history.” His stunning shift on domestic priorities recalls Francois Mitterrand’s “U-turn” of the early 1980s, whereby the French socialist abandoned his “Keynesianism in one country” approach because it could not operate under conditions of international capital mobility and the fixed-currency regime of the European Monetary System (the forerunner of EMU). But whereas Mitterrand changed course over a matter of months and years, Tsipras did so within days. And the defeat was particularly stinging for, as Ellinas (2016, 13) reminds us, “the agreement included many of the measures that Syriza pledged in September 2014 to reverse,” such as “pension cuts, tax cuts, and privatizations.”

It is difficult to imagine a *less* populist recipe than calling a referendum to determine the general will before flouting it and taking the identical position to the supposed enemies of the people. One can debate the political and economic wisdom of this choice: Syriza actually held onto most of its voters in elections in September 2015 as the leadership splintered and critics of Tsipras’ surrender left and formed their own groups, none of which did very well. One could also say that Tsipras truly had no alternative, and that his choosing a bad course of action over a disastrous one (pulling out of the Eurozone) actually led

to a modest—some might say anemic—economic recovery. But one cannot credibly label Syriza a populist party, and arguably not even an old-school leftist one, after the disaster of the bailout referendum. Tsipras admitted there had been ideological change within the party: “We have shown that Syriza is a party of compromise, and that Syriza is the leader of the centre-left. We are a party that belongs to the European family of the governing left” (quoted in *The Economist*, March 21, 2019).

Podemos originated in the Indignados movement of 2011, though there was a three-year lag between the spontaneous street mobilization against austerity and the founding of the party in 2014. There were two principal wings of the party leadership. The first was the Izquierda Anticapitalista, which had been founded in 2008. Its ideological profile (Marxist and anti-globalization) and political influence (negligible) were similar to Syriza’s before 2009. The nucleus of the second wing was comprised of political scientists based at the Complutense University of Madrid. The head of the party, Pablo Iglesias, was named after the Spanish labor union leader of the late nineteenth century and the founder of the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE). Iglesias was active in the youth wing of the communist party and wrote his doctoral dissertation on the anti-globalization movement in Italy and Spain. Before becoming the face of Podemos, he was a political science professor at Complutense and a TV host. Íñigo Errejón, who quickly emerged first as Iglesias’ informal second-in-command and then as his primary internal challenger, wrote his PhD thesis on the rise of Evo Morales using discourse analysis and borrowing heavily from Ernesto Laclau’s theory of populism.

The most notable “populist” feature of Podemos was its use of Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s academic work as a manual for creating a hegemonic political project. The central point of Laclau and Mouffe’s 1985 book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*—that the political subject is constructed through discourse rather than merely class relations—would seem rather arcane, but members of Podemos’ leadership team seemed to relish such intellectual discussions.⁵ More importantly, they claimed to be building a political movement according to ideas laid out in Laclau’s 2005 book *On Populist Reason*. According to Iglesias, Podemos “would not have been possible without ... an understanding of the role of speech, common sentiment, and hegemony that is clearly indebted to the work of Laclau” (quoted in Judis, 2016: 122-3). As campaign advisor, Errejón claimed he was following a “constructivist vision of political discourse” and key Laclauian terms like “articulation of popular discontent” and “resignification of floating signifiers” found their way into the party’s electoral strategy (Kioupiolis 2016). Following Laclau, Errejón claimed that the Indignados were populist in the following five senses: (1) by replacing

the traditional left-right axis by a dichotomy opposing “those at the bottom” to “those at the top”; (2) by constructing a new “transversal” political identity; (3) by universalizing the struggle; (4) by designating a “we” (the people) against a “them” (the ‘regime’); (5) by creating ‘transversal sympathy’ in very diverse groups” (Chazel and Fernandez Vazquez 2020).

I do not dispute that Errejón in particular was sincerely committed to Laclauian concepts. At the same time, it is not shocking that abstruse notions like “transversal sympathies” and “floating signifiers” failed to filter down to the party rank and file. Moreover, the two leaders of Podemos disagreed on their interpretations of Laclau: Iglesias focused on the anti-establishment feature of populism, while Errejón was more concerned with the construction of [Gramscian] hegemony (Chazel and Fernandez Vazquez 2020). These intellectual divides became more acute after the failure of Podemos to improve significantly on its electoral score from December 2015. Iglesias argued that this failure demonstrated the vacuity of the “populist hypothesis” while Errejón attributed it to Podemos’ embrace of the communist left. There followed a debate within the party about, in Iglesias’ words, “whether we should continue being populists or not” (quoted in Faber and Seguin 2019). This reached a climax at the party’s citizen’s assembly from December 2016 to February 2017 (known as *Vistalegre II*) and there was a proxy battle over party strategy between Iglesias and Errejón. When Errejón’s proposal lost, it was seen as a repudiation of his “populist hypothesis.” He formally left Podemos in January 2019.

A second crisis within Podemos unfolded when Iglesias and his partner Irene Montero, who was also Podemos’ parliamentary spokeswoman, bought a villa for \$700,000 in an upscale neighborhood outside Madrid. This was certainly not the type of “anti-austerity” that the party had been founded upon, and the villa soon turned into a scandal. The Podemos mayor of Cádiz José María González chastised Iglesias and Montero: “Podemos’s ethics code isn’t a formality ... It’s a commitment to live like working people so you can represent them” (quoted in *The Guardian*, May 20, 2018). Iglesias and Montero put the matter to a confidence vote in his continued leadership of the party and won with 68.4%. But the damage to Podemos’ anti-elitism had already been done.

Podemos’ populist credentials have been diminished in other ways as well. It abandoned its policy of no coalitions when it entered one with the Socialists (SPOE) following the elections of 2019. The December 2019 coalition agreement calls for “respect for the mechanisms of budgetary discipline,” which signals a pretty clear rejection of Podemos’ identity as an anti-austerity party, and a major shift in tone from Iglesias’ 2014 pledge to “work with other parties from the south of Europe to make it clear we don’t want to become a German colony” (quoted in *El País in English*, May 31, 2014).

Aside from adopting Laclau's discourse, Podemos had a second claim to the populist mantle: direct democracy through online participation and decision-making. The party's online portal, *Participa* (participate), grew from discussion forums on Reddit and was constructed to gather input from ordinary members and conduct voting. For example, in preparation for the 2015 and 2016 electoral manifestoes, Podemos solicited proposals under the decision rule that any single proposal that received 100 votes had to be considered by the central party organ. Furthermore, the party instituted a mechanism through which citizens could make any policy proposal binding if it received enough votes online (Podemos Citizen Initiative, ICP). Finally, the party used online referendums to call votes of confidence in the leadership, as Iglesias and Montero did following the villa scandal.

It is doubtful, however, that any of these online mechanisms have actually increased internal party democracy. Only 4% of the party's 380,000 members participated in the creation of the 2015 and 2016 electoral manifestoes mentioned earlier. To date, there has never been a successful ICP because, according to an interview with a Podemos insider, "the threshold was set too high because of the leadership's fear of losing control over the decision-making process" (Gerbaudo 2019, 7). And online referendums feel less like a means of gauging opinions and more like a Bonapartist device for arriving at consent at predetermined objectives. The margins of victory for the leadership's positions were overwhelming: 96.9% to make Iglesias General Secretary of the party in 2014, 89% to reelect him to the same position in 2017, and 98% for forming the alliance with Izquierda Unida in 2016. The lowest margin of victory was the confidence vote in Iglesias and Montero at 68.4%. "For critics," the author of one recent study notes, "this online referendum exhibited the worst centralistic and plebiscitary tendencies of digital democracy, and only [helped] two embattled leaders to silence criticism and restore their own legitimacy" (Gerbaudo 2019, 9).

The Italian five-star movement (M5S) is different from both Syriza and Podemos as it did not emerge from a preexisting party or social movement. The original five stars were: 1) sustainable transport, 2) sustainable development, 3) public water, 4) universal internet access, and 5) environmentalism. The case for inclusionary populist does not rest on this greenish ideology, but rather its promise of direct democracy. Beppe Grillo—the comic turned political activist—stated in 2011 that "The M5S wants the citizens to become [the] State, not to replace parties with another party" (quoted in Pirro, 2018, 445). He lamented in 2013 that "the popular will is continuously bypassed and humiliated" and argued that the solution was putting the "tools in the hands of citizens." And these tools were digital.

"I dream of my son voting yes or not on a computer from his home, whether to go to Afghanistan or not, whether staying in Europe or not, if leaving the Euro or not" (interview in *Pomezia*, January 23, 2013). Another former M5S politician quipped that the goal was to make "politics as direct as booking tickets on Ryanair, or booking a room on Airbnb" (Gerbaudo 2019, 3). Article 4 of the original party statute gave to "the totality of the users of the internet the role of government and leadership which is normally attributed to a few." Since one could become a member of M5S with several mouse-clicks, the new party experienced an exponential growth in membership.

The actual goal of this techno-populism was not to increase internal party democracy, but rather to give the appearance of participation. For it was not Grillo who designed and maintained his online movement, but an eccentric computer scientist named Gianroberto Casaleggio who had no political experience before becoming the co-founder of the M5S. An investigative journalist for *Wired* noted how Casaleggio was fascinated by the possibilities the internet provided for opinion formation:

Casaleggio was interested in learning how consensus—on say, whether people should be happy to work long hours—could be manufactured in a way that looked organic. Twenty years before trolls working for Russia's Internet Research Agency would use similar techniques to steer debate on Facebook and other online forums, Casaleggio seemed to be using his own company as a laboratory to figure out how online discourse could be guided from above. (Loucaides 2019)

Casaleggio introduced himself to Grillo in 2004 after waiting outside the actor's dressing room. He offered to build Grillo a blog, which went live on January 26, 2005. Shortly thereafter, *beppegrillo.it* had become one of the top-ten most read blogs in the world. According to former M5S politician Marco Canestrari, "Grillo never wrote a single word on the blog" (Biondo and Canestrari 2018). Filippo Pitarello (also a former M5S) similarly recalls that "Grillo and Casaleggio would speak several times a day to discuss the content of the daily posts, and Casaleggio might read out the final draft to Grillo over the phone." Such was the extent of Grillo's participation.

It was also Gianroberto Casaleggio who built the party's Rousseau platform, which he willed to his son Davide Casaleggio following the former's death in 2016.⁶ The Rousseau platform allowed M5S members two avenues for participation: online voting and proposing amendments to legislation. Thus far, the research on online voting suggests that it was of a strongly plebiscitary character. Mosca (2018) finds that "the leaders establish the timing, the topic, and the terms of the ballot" and that participation rates declined from 64% in 2012, to 36% in 2015, to 14.7% in 2017. As in the case of Podemos, online voting within the M5S has produced

overwhelming majorities for the party elite, such as 94% for a coalition with the Lega in 2018 or 91.6% for approving the new party statute in 2016.

The M5S's record on integrating citizen input on legislation is similarly poor. The party immediately eliminates proposals that are deemed inconsistent with the party line. Rousseau was not designed to allow members to communicate directly with one another: all they could do was read and post comments. There was thus no meaningful deliberation (Deseriis and Vittori 2019). Rather, "the Rousseau platform mostly offered a showcase for the legislative initiatives of the M5S MP's, followed by a disorderly list of low-quality and largely ignored comments ... the activists contribution to the parliamentary activity through the platform was close to zero" (Tronconi 2018, 175). Similarly, Deseriis and Vittori (2019, 5699) conclude that "the end result is that a negligible number of M5S-sponsored bills are directly based on member proposals." Mosca (2018) concurs: "Rousseau seems to work more as a forum for discussion and evaluation than as a real online decision-making tool, with the risk of doubling the national blog of the Movement where comments have a simply expressive function." Internal democracy was, in short, never one of the M5S's chief features, despite its promises to the contrary. Tronconi (2018, 170) reminds us that "if M5S activists questioned the leadership or pushed for greater internal democracy, they were expelled ... a blunt post on the blog was sufficient to expel the dissenters with no appeal. Over 40 parliamentarians had been expelled by 2017, and a tell-all written by former M5S members exposes Casaleggio's remarkable degree of control (Biondo and Canestrari 2018).

Like both Podemos and Syriza, M5S also changes its internal rules once it gains power. The founding principle of no-alliances (which is actually consistent with a party that claims it has the moral high-ground) was jettisoned when it formed a coalition government with the Lega. Issue positions shifted with the winds: In December 2017, Di Maio stated that he would vote and campaign for a referendum on Italy leaving the Eurozone, but by February of 2018 pronounced that the "European Union is the Five Star Movement's Home."

Much like Socialist parties in the early twentieth century, the anti-austerity parties that promised to return power to the people quickly succumbed to the Iron Law of Oligarchy. Iglesias had initially claimed that "Podemos is not a party, but a method to facilitate the protagonism of the citizenry" (Gerbaudo 2019, 3). After the party split, Lola Sanchez, one of first five Podemos candidates elected to the EP, lamented Iglesias and Errejón's centralizing tendencies: "Their leadership attitudes have been very traditional, classically alpha-male, top-down. I honestly thought Podemos was going to be something different" (quoted in Faber and Seguin 2019.)

What's Populist about Competitive Authoritarianism?

Hungary is the only "formerly consolidated liberal democracy in the EU that has reached the level of a non-democratic system as a hybrid regime" (Bozóki and Hegedüs 2018, 1178). Although Viktor Orbán had been dismantling Hungarian democracy since at least 2010, it was really only in the wake of Brexit and Trump that political scientists took special notice. Orbán has since come to represent a variety of "authoritarian populism" (Norris and Ingelhart 2019) or "illiberal populism" (Mounk 2018) that is not conceptually distinct from the radical right in Western Europe. The difference, however, is that Orbán is actually able to realize his populist vision.

Following this line of argument, Pappas (2019, 71) claims that populists in power display four characteristics: "1) a reliance on extraordinary charismatic leadership; 2) the ceaseless, strategic pursuit of political polarization; 3) a drive to seize control of the state, emasculate liberal institutions, and impose an illiberal constitution; and 4) the systematic use of patronage to reward supporters and crowd out the opposition" Müller (2016, 57) puts it similarly: "While they [populists] may have won an initial election fair and square, they quickly start tampering with the institutional machinery of democracy in the name of the so-called real people (as opposed to their political opponents, who are automatically deemed traitors to the nation.)"

I do not disagree that Orbán has followed steps 2–4 of the playbook that Pappas and Müller outline, though I do not think that Orbán qualifies as a charismatic leader in any reasonable sense of the term. Rather, Orbán is in all probability an autocrat, though it is possible he began his assault on Hungarian democracy as a competitive authoritarian and may even have been a convinced democrat at one point. It is not worth dwelling on the nature of a leader's political soul, but the crucial point is that, at least since 2010, Orbán matches all the qualifications for Linz's "disloyal" democratic actor (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). It is unclear how populism adds any additional value to this description.

Some scholars argue that populism may undermine the *quality* of democracy. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2012), for example, hypothesize that populism threatens liberal democracy through "the marginalization of specific groups of society [and] the weakening of political institutions, culminating in the undermining of minority rights and protections" (21). While Orbán certainly pursued these objectives, they were incidental to his construction of competitive authoritarianism. According to Levitsky and Way (2010): "competitive authoritarian regimes are civilian regimes in which formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents' abuse of the state places them at significant advantage vis-à-vis their opponents"

(5). It was not the quality of liberal democracy that Orbán targeted, but democracy itself.

He articulated as much in 2009 during a private address to his party where he outlined the need to create a “central political forcefield” capable of governing Hungary for the next twenty years. The elections of 2010 gave Fidesz a supermajority in the Hungarian assembly, which Orbán used to rewrite the Hungarian constitution to his party’s enduring electoral benefit. Fidesz preserved its supermajority in the 2014 elections despite seeing its vote-share fall by more than 8%. At the same time, Fidesz worked to “replace key officials in every political relevant institution” (Krekó and Enyedi 2018, 42). These included the judiciary, the electoral commission, the statistical office, the ombudsman, and the media. As of 2017, 90% of all media in Hungary was either owned by the state or by Fidesz allies (Beauchamp 2018). On March 30, 2020, the Fidesz-dominated parliament approved a bill that handed Orbán indefinite emergency powers, cancelled all elections until 2022, and placed severe limits on free speech in what international observers immediately dubbed the “coronavirus coup.”

What relevance is populism to the breakdown of Hungarian democracy from 2010–2020? One theoretical possibility is that a populist victory can lead directly to competitive authoritarianism. Using cases from Latin America, Levitsky and Lofton (2012, 162) claim that “successful populism frequently leads to competitive authoritarianism” for three reasons. First, since populists “are often amateur politicians who emerge from outside the established party system” they “often lack the skills—or patience—to pursue their political objectives through those institutions.” Second, having earned a “mandate to bury the political establishment,” populists work aggressively to sweep away existing democratic institutions like political parties, legislatures, and judiciaries. Third, “populists’ incentive to assault representative institutions is often reinforced by the fact that the political elite that they mobilized against and defeated in elections continues to control these institutions. Lacking strong parties, populists often fail to translate their electoral success into a legislative majority” (163).

Orbán’s slow-moving power grab displays none of these dynamics. First, and most obviously, Orbán was not a political amateur but a mainstream conservative politician. He was not an outsider in any meaningful sense. Fidesz also did not come to power with any sort of mandate to “bury” the political establishment, for the simple reason that Fidesz had long been a part of it. It was also not the case that Orbán was incapable of pursuing his objectives through institutions: it was his knowledge of those institutions that allowed him to hollow them out without attracting international attention. Moreover, Orbán was also not lacking in a strong political party: indeed, the preexisting strength of Fidesz was a necessary condition for erecting a one-party state so rapidly.

Norris and Inglehart (2019) write that “it is the combination of authoritarian values disguised by populist rhetoric which we regard as potentially the most dangerous threat to liberal democracy” (6). I could not agree more and believe that the verb *disguise* here is just as revealing as Mudde’s (2017) description of populism as a “fuzzy blanket to camouflage the nastier nativism.” Labeling semi-loyal democratic actors like Orbán “populists” only serves to mask their authoritarianism.

Conclusion

I have not offered an alternative definition of populism in this critique of its relevance to nativism, anti-austerity politics, and competitive authoritarianism. There are two reasons for this. First, I cannot improve upon Mudde’s definition for its clarity and portability. Second, I am not convinced that “populism” really exists in the same way I am certain that regime types do (democracy, authoritarianism, and now competitive authoritarianism) or that nativism does. I am persuaded by Urbanati’s (2019, 117) suggestion that “the dualism of we good/they bad is the motor of all forms of partisan aggregation; clearly, a certain populist style can be detected in almost all parties, particularly when they radicalize their claims near elections.” Populism is not likely to be of much analytical use if it is indeed this ubiquitous.⁷

But the academic stakes of this debate are low compared to the political ones. Pronouncing something or someone “populist” in the media (social or otherwise) matters far more than doing so in the pages of academic journals. Misdiagnosing Trump as an economic populist, for example, might lead the Democratic party to try and woo back the white-working class through economic policies, which might be desirable in their own right but are not likely to be effective if nativist attitudes outweigh economic motives in vote choice. Most concerning, in my view, is the widespread defense of populism—at least a part of it— as a natural and oftentimes welcome feature of democratic politics. C. Vann Woodward once argued that “one must expect and even hope that there will be future upheavals to shock the seats of power and privilege and furnish the periodic therapy that seems necessary to the health of our democracy” (Woodward 1959, 72). Kazin made the same point decades later:

They arise [populists] in response to real grievances: an economic system that favors the rich, fear of losing jobs to new immigrants, and politicians who care more about their own advancement than the well-being of the majority. Ultimately, the only way to blunt their appeal is to take those problems seriously. (Kazin 2016, 18)

I have precisely the opposite reaction. If citizens have a serious grievance with the separation of powers inherent in modern democracies, is the answer really to bolster the power of the executive? If voters want to see an immediate stop to immigration because they fear a terrorist attack in

their neighborhood, is the answer to cater to some of their demands in the hopes of moderating their opinions? This would assume that nativism can be bargained with, and the record shows that it really cannot. Mainstream politicians should not be raising these grievances themselves, but rather correcting misinformed partisans and distancing themselves from the most extreme views. An example would be presidential candidate John McCain in 2008 correcting a woman at a townhall who said she could not trust Obama and that he was “an Arab.” McCain gently took the microphone from her hand and said: “No, ma’am ... he’s a decent family man, citizen, that I just happen to have disagreements with.” This moment feels like a century ago, but it is imperative we find a way back to it if liberal democracy is to have any hopes of taming the corrosive forces of nativism.

Notes

- Berlin’s views on populism from the conference are best captured in his verbatim remarks reproduced in “To Define Populism” at the Isiah Berlin Virtual Library (<http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/bibliography/bib111bLSE.pdf>). They do not appear in the edited version of the conference proceedings (Berlin et al. 1968) nor in Gellner and Ionescu’s (1969) edited volume that resulted from the conference. The conference proceedings especially still make for fascinating reading today.
- This essay is not exhaustive, and major cases such as Brexit and the potential erosion of democracy in Poland are not included for reasons of space. But neither seems to be a clear-cut case of global populism. The Brexit campaign (like the 2016 U.S. elections) was dominated by nativism, and Poland appears to be imitating the Hungarian road to competitive authoritarianism.
- Bannon’s remarks are recorded at <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-43366657/bannon-let-them-call-you-racist>.
- One could also make a case for the Dutch Socialist party as a left-wing populist party, though like *Die Linke* its roots lie in communist organizations and its flirtation with populism appears to have been brief; see van Kessel 2015.
- For Iglesias’s views on Laclau and Mouffe’s influence on Podemos, see his article in the *New Left Review* (2015).
- In this sense, the passing of the Rousseau platform from father to son, “was a sort of transfer based on inheritance right, which surprisingly contradicted the principle of pure organizational horizontality on which the party had always claimed to be founded”; Tronconi 2018, 165.
- Urbanati, it should be noted, is not as skeptical of the concept of populism as I am. Her criticisms of the literature on populism are nonetheless incisive.

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