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Edited by Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser

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# 1 Populism and (liberal) democracy: a framework for analysis

*Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser*

Populist movements are widely regarded, especially in Europe and Latin America, as threats to democracy. Yet New Populists explicitly claim to be true democrats, setting out to reclaim power for the people.

– Canovan 2004: 244

## Introduction

One of the most used and abused terms inside and outside of academia is undoubtedly *populism*. At times it seems that almost every politician, at least those we do not like, is a populist. The term has been applied to both Venezuelan left-wing president Hugo Chávez and American right-wing vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, and to both the radical left Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) and the radical right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ). It has also been hailed as a way to include the underclass and scorned as a programme to exclude minorities. No wonder some authors have called for the abandonment of the use of the allegedly meaningless term (e.g. Roxborough 1984).

We acknowledge the broad usage of the term populism, and the problems associated with that, but attempt to construct a framework within which the term populism has a clear meaning and its relationship to democracy can be studied *empirically*. In fact, most studies that have analysed the tension between populism and democracy tend to make normative and theoretical arguments, but little has been said from an empirical point of view. Moreover, although it is true that this growing body of literature has generated new insights, it relies on very different, and sometimes even contradictory, concepts of both populism and democracy (e.g. Abts and Rummens 2007; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2007; Conniff 1999; de la Torre and Peruzzotti 2008; Decker 2006; Laclau 2005a; Mény and Surel 2000, 2002a; Panizza 2005; Taggart 2000). Having this in mind, this framework ensures the broad applicability (in time and place) of the key concepts of this research topic by adhering to Giovanni Sartori's approach (1970) of so-called minimal definitions

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(cf. Collier and Gerring 2009). Accordingly, the main aim of this chapter is to provide a clear conceptual and theoretical framework to guide the individual case studies of the book, ensuring a common core yet leaving space for individual accents.

In the first two sections we define the key terms in the framework: populism and (liberal) democracy. We briefly discuss the main trends in the literature and present clear minimal definitions. In the third section we discuss the different ways in which the relationship between populism and (liberal) democracy has been described in the academic debate. Through a critical analysis of the scholarly literature, and the application of our own definitions, we set out our own position on the relationship between the two. In the next two sections we discuss the two key research questions underlying this edited volume: (1) What are the effects of populist actors on liberal democracies? and (2) under which circumstances do populists constitute a corrective or a threat to the liberal democratic system?

It is critical to understand that our primary concern is populism, not the host ideology it has attached itself to or the person who expresses it. One of the crucial tasks is therefore to separate populism from features that might regularly occur together *with* it, but are not part *of* it. For example, populist radical right parties in Europe share a core ideology of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde 2007); all three features have a strained relationship with liberal democracy, but we are only interested in the effect of *populism* (even though, admittedly, the effects are not always easy to disentangle in reality).

In a similar vein, scholars have convincingly demonstrated that populism in Latin America is compatible with both neoliberalism and state-centred development (Roberts 1995; Weyland 1996, 2001). In fact, even contemporary Europe hosts both left-wing and right-wing populist parties (e.g. Albertazzi and McDonnell 2007; March and Mudde 2005). Accordingly, there is no reason to assume that a certain economic doctrine is a defining attribute of populism. This implies that it makes little sense to define the latter on the basis of a specific set of economic and/or social policies.

Finally, it is important to underline that populism and clientelism are not synonymous. As Herbert Kitschelt and Steven Wilkinson (2007) have recently pointed out, clientelism involves a whole organizational structure (mostly of informal character) in charge of both monitoring voter behaviour and delivering the expected goods to the clientele. Without a doubt, populist leaders in Latin America have shown a propensity to use clientelist linkages, but this does not mean that populism is necessarily related to this kind of linkage (Filc 2010; Mouzelis 1985; Weyland 2001).

## 1.1 Defining populism

One of the reasons that so many different politicians have been called populist is that there are so many different understandings and usages of the term populism. Some are extremely broad and vague, including most of the popular usages that equate populism with campaigning, demagoguery, or ‘the mob’ (e.g. Canovan 2004; Laclau 2005a; Mudde 2004). But even in the academic literature *populism* is used to refer to a range of very different phenomena and is attached to a broad variety of ‘host ideologies’ and political actors. While it is impossible, and unnecessary, to debate all existing definitions, we will provide a short overview of the main historical manifestations of populism and a concise discussion of three conceptual approaches – populism as a movement, as a political style, and as a discourse – that are commonly used. Finally, we will provide the *minimal* definition of populism to which we adhere and which is employed by all authors in this volume.

### 1.1.1 *A brief conceptual history of the term populism*

The origins of the concept of populism are normally traced back to the end of the nineteenth century, when the Populist Party in the United States and the so-called Narodniki in Russia emerged (Canovan 1981: 5–6). Although the word *populism* appears as a self-description in both cases, the two experiences were very different: While the U.S. Populist Party was, first and foremost, a mass movement commanded by farmers who demanded a radical change of the political system (Hofstadter 1969), the Russian Narodniki was a group of middle-class intellectuals who endorsed a romanticized view of rural life (Walicki 1969). To these two original experiences it is quite common to add a third one, namely the peasant movements that appeared in several parts of Eastern Europe and the Balkans in the inter-war years (Ionescu 1969). The commonality of these movements was in their defence of an agrarian programme in which the peasantry was seen as the main pillar of both society and economy (Mudde 2002: 219).

With the rise of the Great Depression of the 1930s, populism started to emerge also in Latin America. Indeed, it is in this region that populism gained most visibility during the twentieth century, with the cases of Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina and Getúlio Vargas in Brazil as the most famous examples (Germani 1978; Weffort 1978). These leaders were actually part of a new generation of politicians, who by appealing to ‘the people’ rather than to the ‘working class’ were able to build multi-class coalitions and mobilize lower-class groups (Drake 2009: chapter 6).

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In effect, populist parties and movements represented a major challenge to the Marxist left in Latin America, since they were never constrained by ideological orthodoxy, and were thus capable of developing a profile appealing to a broad electorate rather than an intellectual vanguard (Angell 1998).

In Western Europe populism jumped onto the scene only at the end of the last century. Among the few exceptions is the case of Poujadism in France, a populist movement with an eclectic ideology that made a brief breakthrough in the 1950s and did not have a major impact on the political landscape (Priester 2007: 142–58). Between the 1930s and 1970s populism also took root in both Canada and the United States. While in the former populism appeared most notably in the form of the Social Credit movement (Laycock 2005a), in the latter populism gained momentum with the rise of very different figures such as Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and George Wallace (Kazin 1995).

Though this brief and schematic overview of populism's main historical manifestations before the 1980s is far from complete, it is helpful for illustrating that the concept of populism has been applied to a wide range of experiences. Hence, developing a plausible and useful definition of populism is anything but simple. To confront this problem, more than forty years ago a group of well-known scholars participated in a conference held in London under the title 'To Define Populism.' As the report of this conference (Berlin, Hofstadter, MacRae et al. 1968) and the famous edited volume resulting from it (Ionescu and Gellner 1969) reveal, the participants used the term *populism* for such a perplexing variety of phenomena that the organizers seem to have made little effort to establish a minimum definitional agreement. More than forty years later the number of scholars of populism has increased manifold and we are probably even further from a definitional consensus within the scholarly community. This notwithstanding, can we identify a central core present in all the manifestations of populism?

Although certain authors have answered this question negatively (e.g. Canovan 1982; Hermet 2003), many others have tried to develop a conceptual approach with the aim of identifying the elements present in all manifestations of populism. Given that a thorough overview of the existing approaches is beyond the scope of this framework, we will critically examine three notions of populism that are very influential not only inside and outside of academia, but also in the analysis of Europe and the Americas.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Strictly speaking, in the case of Latin America it is possible to identify a fourth approach, which relies on an economic perspective. This approach defines populism as a particular

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The first approach conceives of populism as a particular type of political movement. In this respect, the foundational work is probably Seymour Martin Lipset's *Political Man* (1960), which proposed a definition of populism that became highly popular in the study of Latin American politics. According to Lipset, the rise of Perón in Argentina and Vargas in Brazil should be analysed as a phenomenon similar to the rise of fascism in Europe, since both cases stand for the emergence of extremist mass movements. Nevertheless, he argues that there is one key difference between Latin American populism and European fascism: While the former relied on the lower classes, the latter hinged on the middle classes. Following this perspective, Gino Germani (1978) defined populism as a *multi-class* movement organized around a charismatic leader. Seen in this light, the main feature of populism is not only the presence of a strong leader but also, and mainly, the formation of a movement appealing to very heterogeneous social groups (Collier and Collier 1991; Conniff 1999; Drake 1978; Oxhorn 1998).

Certainly, the idea that populism tends to foster multi-class alliances is not unjustified. By making use of the notion of 'the people,' populist leaders and parties claim to represent a variety of different groups sharing a common idea: Popular sovereignty has been corrupted by the elites. However, the formation of multi-class alliances is not a defining attribute of populism, but rather a central element of mass politics. As Alan Knight (1998: 238–40) has pointed out, successful political parties such as the Christian democratic and social democratic parties in Europe are characterized precisely by their capacity to mobilize and represent a plethora of social groups, yet we do not refer to these cases as examples of populism. Not by coincidence, Otto Kirchheimer (1965; cf. Krouwel 2003) developed the notion of *Völksparteien* (catch-all parties) to describe those parties able to build a programme that is appealing to voters with very different socio-economic and socio-cultural backgrounds.

The second approach defines populism as a political style characterized by the promotion of a particular kind of link between political leaders and the electorate, a link structured around a loose and opportunistic

type of macroeconomic policy that is extremely harmful, since in the short run it generates growth and redistribution via increasing state expansion, but in the long run it leads to rising inflation and public debt and thus a major economic crisis (Dornbusch and Edwards 1991; Edwards 2010; Sachs 1989). Although this interpretation has some plausibility for analysing specific cases (e.g. the first government of Alan García in Peru), it is difficult to see why this type of macroeconomic policy is the essential attribute of populism. As Roberts (1995) and Weyland (1996) have pointed out, in the 1990s some Latin American populist actors have employed neoliberal recipes, which were neither 'irresponsible' nor very popular among the electorate (Panizza 2009: chapter 3). Put briefly, it is flawed to assume that a particular type of (economic) policy is a definitional attribute of populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2011).

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appeal to ‘the people’ in order to win and/or exercise political power. For instance, Peter Mair (2002: 84) defines populism as “a means of linking an increasingly undifferentiated and depoliticized electorate with a largely neutral and non-partisan system of governance.” According to this approach, populism designates a dimension of political action or discourse, and in consequence, it is compatible with all forms of leaders, movements, and parties (Taguieff 1995). Social democratic governments such as those of Tony Blair in the United Kingdom (e.g. Mair 2006) and Gerhard Schröder in Germany (e.g. Jun 2006) are seen as prime examples of this populist style of politics, since in both cases political leaders ruled not only based on surveys and spin doctors, but also against (rather than with) their political parties in order to enact reforms that were allegedly relevant for ‘the people.’

The main problem of this approach lies in its propensity to conflate phenomena like demagoguery or opportunism with populism, so that the latter is defined in a way that almost all political actors, particularly in campaign periods, can be labelled as populist (Mudde 2004: 543). Hence, by proposing such a broad concept of populism, this approach develops more a catchword than an analytical concept that has discriminating power for undertaking comparative research. In other words, neither the use of spin doctors and surveys, nor the development of pragmatic positions and the avoidance of partisan conflicts is specific to populism.

The third and last approach is a discursive one, whose main exponent is Ernesto Laclau (1977, 2005a, 2005b). Criticizing the economic determinism present in most interpretations of Marx, he developed a theory of populism whereby the latter is understood as a particular political logic, not as the result of particular class alliances. In a nutshell, Laclau maintains that this political logic is characterized by the confrontation of the existing hegemony by means of a discursive construction capable of dividing the social into two camps, namely ‘the power bloc’ versus ‘the people.’ This discourse does not emerge by accident, but is rather the product of a three-step process involved in radical politics: first the linking of very different demands, then the formation of a collective identity through the recognition of an enemy (e.g. the establishment), and finally the affective investment in an element (e.g. the leader) that represents ‘the people’ (Kleis Nielsen 2006: 89).

Although Laclau’s theory of populism is interesting, it has serious problems when it comes to analysing populism in more concrete terms. As Yannis Stavrakakis (2004) has indicated, since Laclau – particularly in his last writings – equates populism with politics, the very concept of populism is defined in a way that is not helpful for undertaking empirical analysis. In effect, if populism should be seen as synonymous with



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the political, only two very doubtful pathways for research remain possible: Either populism is something omnipresent, or anything that is not populist cannot be considered political. To sum up, Laclau's theory of populism is, on the one hand, extremely abstract, and on the other hand, it proposes a concept of populism that becomes so vague and malleable it loses much of its analytic utility (Mouzelis 1978).

### 1.1.2 *Towards a minimal definition of populism*

Obviously, populism is not the only contested concept in the social sciences. In fact, most concepts are contested at some level. Nevertheless, in most cases some basic aspects are above discussion; for example, despite all debate about the true meaning of conservatism, virtually all definitions consider it an ideology or an attitude. But, as we noted before, even this kind of consensus cannot be found in the literature on populism. Since the end of the 1990s, however, an important development in the debate on how to define populism has occurred. This development is related to the rise of new contributions aiming to develop a definition of populism capable of avoiding the problems of conceptual travelling (i.e. the application of concepts to new cases) and conceptual stretching (i.e. the distortion that occurs when a concept does not fit the new cases). To cope with these problems, two main approaches have been employed: radial and classical categorization (Collier and Mahon 1993).

Both radial and classical categorizations seek to confront Sartori's (1970) dilemma of the inversely proportional relation between the intension and extension of concepts: The more defining attributes a concept has (i.e. greater *intension*), the fewer instances it encompasses (i.e. more limited *extension*). The main difference between both types of categorization relies on the way in which they deal with the Sartorian intension–extension dilemma. Given that the radial categorization follows Wittgenstein's idea of family resemblance, it assumes that a phenomenon can be conceptualized on the basis of a pool of defining attributes, which are not shared by all the cases. In other words, none of the cases are exactly the same, but each family member shares several defining attributes with all other members. By contrast, the classical categorization postulates that the defining attributes of a concept must be seen as necessary and sufficient criteria; that is, *all* 'family members' should share *all* defining variables. This means that the classical categorization aims to identify the lowest common denominator between all manifestations of a particular phenomenon.

Although the radial categorization has significant potential in certain areas of the social sciences, we are sceptical about its advantages for the

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study of populism.<sup>2</sup> First of all, since the populist label has been attached to such a wide variety of phenomena, it is hard to reach a consensus on the defining attributes of populism in order to build a family resemblance (Sikk 2009). In other words, radial definitions of populism may foster a sort of pseudo-consensus: “Agreement on a term may disguise disagreement on its meaning. In encompassing conceptual diversity, they may perpetuate rather than reduce confusion” (Weyland 2001: 3). In fact, by employing a radial definition it might be the case that different authors stick to their own conceptualizations instead of trying to arrive at a common understanding of the core aspects of populism. Hence, classical categorization is the best way to enhance conceptual clarity and foster cumulative knowledge, particularly when it comes to studying populism from a comparative perspective.

This begs the following question: How do we reach a *minimal* definition of populism? In this regard, it is worth mentioning that at least implicitly almost all concepts of populism share the idea that the latter always alludes to a confrontation between ‘the people’ and ‘the establishment.’ As Margaret Canovan (1981: 294) has indicated, “[A]ll forms of populism without exception involve some kind of exaltation of and appeal to ‘the people’, and all are in one sense or another anti-elitist.” Seen in this light, it seems that every manifestation of populism criticizes the existence of powerful minorities, which in one way or another are obstructing the will of the common people.

Following this intuition, and in line with the earlier work of one of the authors, populism is defined here as *a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people* (e.g. Mudde 2007: 23, 2004: 543). This means that populism is in essence a form of *moral* politics, as the distinction between ‘the elite’ and ‘the people’ is first and foremost moral (i.e. pure vs. corrupt), not situational (e.g. position of power), socio-cultural (e.g. ethnicity, religion),

<sup>2</sup> One of the few examples of the use of a radial categorization to define populism can be found in Roberts (1995), who maintains that Latin American populism should be conceptualized on the basis of five defining attributes that are not always present. These defining attributes are: (1) a personalistic and paternalistic, though not necessarily charismatic, pattern of political leadership; (2) a heterogeneous, multi-class political coalition concentrated in subaltern sectors of society; (3) a top-down process of political mobilization that either bypasses institutionalized forms of mediation or subordinates them to more direct linkages between the leader and the masses; (4) an amorphous or eclectic ideology characterized by a discourse that exalts subaltern sectors or is anti-elitist and/or anti-establishment; (5) an economic project that utilizes widespread redistributive or clientelistic methods to create a material foundation for popular sector support.



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or socio-economic (e.g. class). Moreover, both categories are to a certain extent ‘empty signifiers’ (Laclau 1977), as it is the populists who construct the exact meanings of ‘the elite’ and ‘the people’ (de la Torre 2000; Stanley 2008). In more specific terms, we conceive populism as a thin-centred ideology that has three core concepts (the people, the elite, and the general will) and two direct opposites (elitism and pluralism) (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser forthcoming).

As populism is a ‘thin-centred ideology,’ exhibiting ‘a restricted core attached to a narrower range of political concepts’ (Freeden 1998: 750), it can be attached to other ideologies, be they thick (e.g. liberalism, socialism) or thin (e.g. ecologism, nationalism). This ideological flexibility is what Paul Taggart (2000) refers to as the chameleonic nature of populism. However, this should not distract us from the clear and distinctive core of populism itself. And, to re-state, we are interested here, first and foremost, in what the populist part of political actors contributes to the political agenda, not the nationalist or socialist or whatever other parts.

It is important to note that this minimal concept is close to many definitions used to study populism in both the Americas (e.g. de la Torre 2000; Hawkins 2009, 2010; Kazin 1995) and Europe (e.g. Art 2011; Pankowski 2010; Stanley 2008). In addition, this minimal concept can and has been applied in empirical research around the globe (e.g. Filc 2010; Jagers 2006; Mudde 2007). Furthermore, Kirk Hawkins (2009, 2010) has proposed a very similar approach for the analysis of Latin American populism and offers an interesting methodology to measure populism through the speeches of chief executives.

How does this minimum definition of populism relate to alternatives put forward in the literature? First, it comes very close to most definitions of populism as a discourse and political style/strategy, in the sense that it agrees on the content, but disagrees on the importance or sincerity. Still, whether the populist really believes in the message distributed or whether populism is a strategic tool is largely an empirical question, which is often almost impossible to answer conclusively (without getting into the populist’s head). Second, the definition says nothing about the type of mobilization of the populist actor, an aspect that is central in several definitions of populism in Latin American studies (e.g. Roberts 2006; Weyland 2001). While we do acknowledge a logical connection to certain types of mobilization (e.g. charismatic leadership, direct communication leader to masses, suspicion of strong party organizations), we are as yet unconvinced of the exact status of the relationship: Is it a constitutive element of populism or an empirical consequence? We have encouraged the authors in this volume to investigate this relationship in their empirical analyses.

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As we have stated elsewhere (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2011), by criticizing Kurt Weyland's (1996, 2001) definition, we are not downplaying the role of leadership in populism. Populist leaders are indeed very relevant. They not only try to mobilize the electorate, but are also one of the main protagonists in the process of defining the morphology of populist ideology. However, an excessive focus on leadership narrows the analysis to the supply-side of the populist phenomenon, generating a kind of modern version of Carlyle's 'great man theory,' which presupposes that the leader is the main and almost only factor that explains political development. In contrast, an ideological definition of populism takes into account both the supply-side and the demand-side of the populist phenomenon, since it assumes that the formation, propagation, and transformation of the populist ideology depends on skilful political entrepreneurs and social groups, who have emotional and rational motives for adhering to the populist ideology.

## 1.2 Defining democracy

Just like populism, democracy is a highly contested concept in the social sciences (e.g. Keane 2009; Tilly 2007). The debates do not only refer to the correct definition of 'democracy,' but also to the various 'models of democracy' (Held 1996) or the discussion on the so-called 'democracy with adjectives' (Collier and Levitsky 1997). Although this is not the place to delve too deep into this debate, we believe that, to clarify our own position, it is relevant to say something about the way in which democracy has been conceptualized, particularly when it comes to studying its relationship with populism. In other words, we are not interested here in developing a new concept of democracy, or in offering a thorough overview of the existing definitions and theories of democracy. Instead, we will provide a brief outline of our understanding of three key concepts used in the debates on populism: democracy, liberal democracy, and radical democracy.

### 1.2.1 Democracy

*Democracy without adjectives* is a term often used and seldom defined. Moreover, in most day-to-day usage it refers to liberal democracy, or at least representative or indirect democracy, rather than democracy per se. In our opinion, democracy (*sans* adjectives) refers to *the combination of popular sovereignty and majority rule*; nothing more, nothing less. Hence, democracy can be direct or indirect, liberal or illiberal. In fact, the very etymology of the term 'democracy' suggests that it alludes to the idea of 'self-government of the people,' a political system in which people rule (Przeworski 2010: 8–9).