

Is populism a problem for democracy?

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- *Populism is not “the problem” but it is “problematic”.*

What is populism?

- “An appeal to the people against both the established structure of power and the dominant values and ideas of society.” (Canovan, 1999)
- “A strategy for winning power and ruling based on a Manichean discourse that polarises society into two antagonistic camps: the people and the oligarchy.” (De la Torre, 2013)
- “A thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite.’ (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012)

But, what *is* populism?

- “A political strategy.” (De la Torre 2013, 26).
- “A mode of political representation.” (Roberts, 2013, 39)
- “A political logic.” (Laclau 2005,44)
- “A thin centred ideology.” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012, 8)
- “A political style.” (Moffitt and Tormey 2014, 386-387; Knight 1998, 23).
- “A type of democracy” (Uribinatti 2014)

Populism as a *mode of political identification*

- Modes of political identification are the material and symbolic practices that constitute and sustain complex, conflictive and permanently dislocated identity claims.
- Identification practices give meaning to our lives: they define who we are and what we want, how we perceive ourselves and how we position ourselves in relation to others.
- Identities are complex, relational and incomplete: Identity is only the name of what we desire but we can never fully obtain
- They involve the construction of differences and of antagonisms and the drawing of political frontiers between 'insiders' and 'outsiders'.

Populism is about constructing “the people”

- A mode of political identification that *constructs* and gives *meaning* to the people as a political actor.

What *is* “the people”?

- The signifier the people refers both to the people as an oppressed and excluded part of the community (the plebs) and as the right holders of sovereignty (the demos).
- Not a positive content but a name (a signifier) that acquires its meaning mainly by setting up a political frontier with reference to what it is not.
- The identity of the people requires the performative drawing of an internal frontier of exclusion within society.
- “The people” is something less than the totality of members of the community.
- A moving frontier: The same political grammar (sovereignty, justice, nationhood) can be articulated to very different ideological contents.

Populism, democracy and sovereignty

- Populism can be understood as a mode of political identification that is available to any political actor operating in a politico-discursive field in which the notion of sovereignty of the people and its inevitable corollary, the conflict between the powerful and the powerless, are core elements of its political imaginary

Michael Kazin: “Populism, an American History”

POPULISM IS NOT “THE PROBLEM”

The three populist backlashes

- Economic backlash: Globalisation.
- Cultural backlash: Cosmopolitan liberalism.
- Political backlash: Epistocracy

Danni Rodrik's “globalisation trilemma”

- Democracy, national sovereignty and deep global economic integration are mutually incompatible: We can combine any two of the three, but never have all three simultaneously and in full.

A cultural counter-revolution

- The spread of liberal-cosmopolitan values has stimulated a cultural backlash among people who feel threatened by this development. Less educated and older citizens, especially white men, who were once the privileged majority culture in Western societies, resent being told that traditional values are “politically incorrect” if they come to feel that they are being marginalised within their own countries (Inglehart and Norris 2016).

“The flaunting of the low” (Pierre Ostiguy)



WHEN THEY GO LOW 
WE GO HIGH

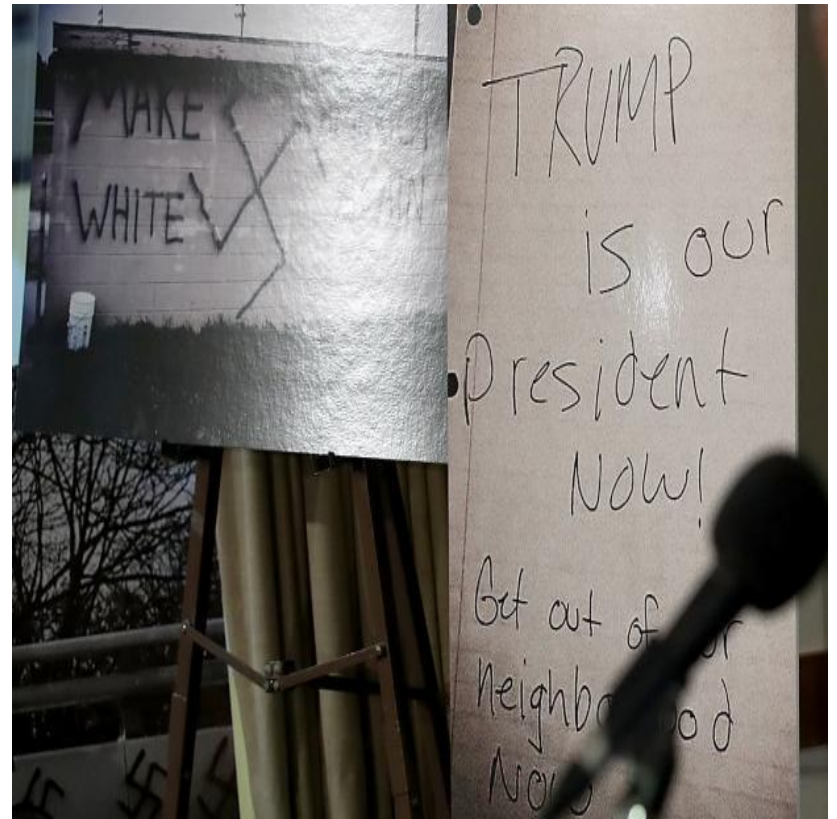
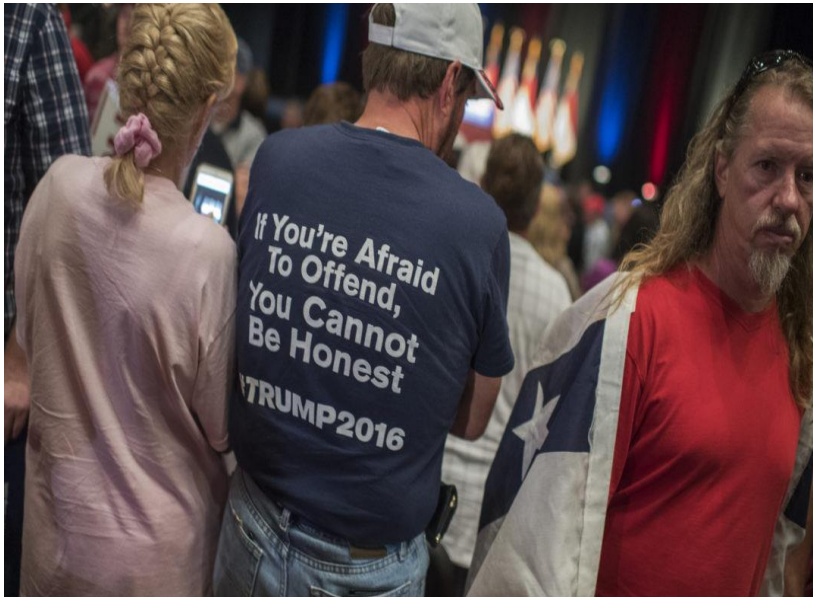
- Populism tends to appeal to stigmatised and marginalised groups of society who face difficulties in finding a positive social identity. Recognition is achieved by the leader's adopting, turning upside down, and putting into public discourse cultural elements that are considered as markers of inferiority by the dominant culture

“The basket of deplorables”

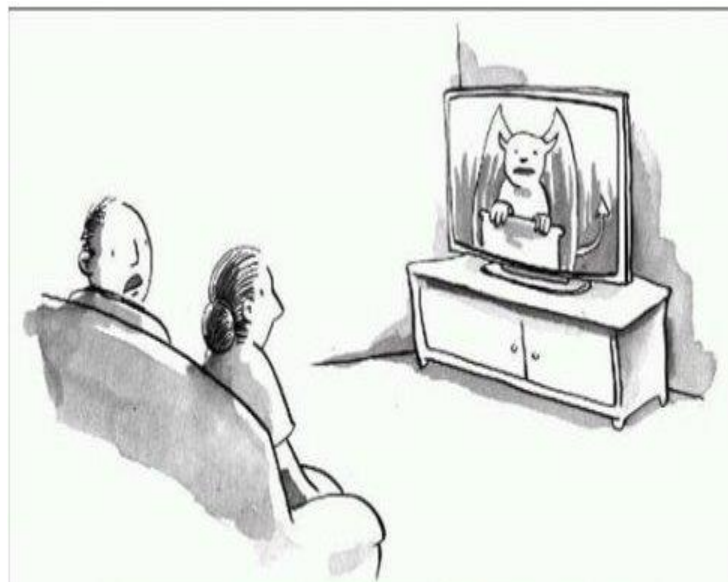
- The trait on the basis of which identity is constituted is by no means necessarily a glamorous feature, it can be a certain failure, weakness, guilt of the other.



The solidarity of the dirty secret



“Telling raw truths”



*"Sure, he's Satan, Prince of darkness, King of Hell,
Lord of lies, the deceiver, bringer of evil and temptation,
but he's not afraid to say what people are thinking."*

The rule of the epistocrats

Britain has had enough of experts, says Gove - Financial Times

<https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c> ▼

Jun 3, 2016 - **Michael Gove** has refused to name any economists who back ... Union, saying that “people in this country have had enough of experts”. Sample ...

The people (and politicians) can't be trusted to get it right

- “Political scientists have been studying voter knowledge for the past 60 years. The results are uniformly depressing. Most voters in most countries are systematically ignorant of even the most basic political facts, let alone more the social scientific theories needed to make sense of these facts.”

- “In an epistocracy, political power is to some degree appointed according to knowledge. An epistocracy might retain the major institutions we see in republican democracy, such as parties, mass elections, constitutional review, and the like. ***But in an epistocracy, not everyone has equal basic power.***” (Jason Brennan).

Democracy and episteme

- The protection of democracy from the risks of populism comes from extending the domains of non-political decisions . But this brings politics rather than populism into trial.
- Criteria or rational competence are necessarily inegalitarian.
- Correct outcomes are achieved because democracy allows the revision and correction of previously made decisions . (Nadia UrbinatiP

BUT, IS IT PROBLEMATIC?

Problematic for whom?

News > Business > Business News

Rise of populism in Europe a bigger threat to the continent's stability than Brexit, says KPMG boss

A string of high-stakes elections in France, Germany and the Netherlands could bring even greater uncertainty to the bloc in the year to come

Zlata Rodionova | Saturday 31 December 2016 09:58 GMT | 

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The rise of populism in Europe is a far greater threat to the continent's stability than Britain's decision to leave the EU, the global chairman of KPMG, one of the world's top four biggest accounting firms, has warned.

A majority of European business chiefs believe the Brexit vote

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Populism as a positive movement of elite containment

- Populism as a democratic expression of political life that is needed from time to time to rebalance the distribution of political power for the benefit of the majority.

Populism as a threat to democracy

- The people and the democratic citizen.
- What is democracy? The will of the majority (concentration of power) or placing limits to power (liberal democracy).
- The mis-recognition of the “Other”.

The effects of populist interventions
in highly institutionalised societies.

De-toxifying and mainstreaming populism

- Acting within the confines of the institutional order, populist interventions redraw the boundaries of political debate by redefining what is sayable and hence doable in a given political order.

The unsayable (2005)



The sayable (2015)



Challenging the boundaries of public discourse

- “Because when be believe in something- we don’t go “are we thinking what we’re thinking. We say it loud!”

(Nigel Farage, 2012)



- “If you look at our whole diagnosis of society’s ills you can hate us, but everyone knows that our ideas are being taken up and reproduced by everyone else”

(Gilbert Collard, National Front politician)

Populism is a dimension of politics

- Narratives not just facts
- Passions not just reasons
- Values not just interests
- Democracy is about the equal distribution of power