

Contributing to the identification of populism: theoretical and practical basis

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Abstract: *The term “populism” is commonly used to refer to populist movements in the U.S. and Russia in the second half of the 19th century. However, the debate about populism is of particular interest to the international community in connection with its rise in the first decades of the 21st century and its great impacts on political and social life in many regions and countries worldwide. Currently, it is still vague to identify populism in terms of its characteristics, nature, manifestations and trends. The article contributes to the study of populism by examining the aspects such as: 1) Identify the definition of populism; 2) Present the development of populism in history; 3) Comment on its characteristics and impacts in the contemporary world.*

Keywords: Populism, Populist Movement, United States, Europe

1. On the category of “Populism”

The term “populism” is popular both in research and practice but its meaning keeps controversial. The different perception of populism is due to its diverse characteristics and forms, various implications and development in certain historical periods by different regions worldwide. Therefore, definitions of populism are varied and the main research topic is that it is either good or bad for democracy (Gagnon et al., 2018: vi-xxv). Terminologically, “populism” is derived from the Latin term “populus”, which means “the people/ the mass of people”. The term “populus” has appeared in Vietnam since the nineteenth century, recorded in the *Dictionarium anamitico latinum* by A.J. L Taberd in

1838. In which, the term “the people” (Chinese: 民) in Vietnamese is equivalent to the Latin word “populus” (Taberd, 1838: 102). The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines “populism” as political ideas and activities that are intended to get the support of ordinary people by giving them what they want (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/populism?q=Populism>). Academically, “populism” is an ambiguous term as it is “not an ideology or a political regime, and cannot be attributed to a specific programmatic content” (Mouffe, 2016). Despite several differences and difficulties in reaching a consensus, scholars agree on some basic features of populism in modern political theory. According to Jan-Werner Müller (2016:

19-20), “populism” is a distinctively moral way to imagine the political world, a normative appeal, which is manifested in social movements such as the 19th century American populism, movements in support of Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren¹. Müller was a particular exception to the lack of theory in research when he asserted that “we simply do not have anything like a theory of populism” (Theo: Gökmen, 2017: 2). Since populism cannot be rendered as a precise concept, scholars are rightly skeptical that it may even be treated as a phenomenon endowed with its distinctiveness and not as an ideological creation instead (Cited by Urbinati, 2019).

Populism is in common use understood as a “thin” ideology which may not exist or manifest in any “pure form” with a solid normative program for political actions as a means to use and develop (e.g. Liberalism, Socialism, Socialism, even Communism, and Nationalism) (Abts) (Abts), Rummens, 2007; Mudde, Kaltwasser, 2012; Mudde, Kaltwasser, 2013; Stanley, 2008). Besides, populism is also considered as a form of discourse, political leadership, and strategy, or a way of doing politics (Knight, 1998). Frank Decker (2006) and Cas Mudde (2004) argue that “populism” inherently have no intrinsic value, only emphasizes the idea of “the people” and often juxtapose this group against “the elite”; intend at vying for and taking advantage of the people’s trust for their purposes with empty promises and irresponsibility. To Fukuyama (2017), the term “populism” has been used very loosely with the following main characteristics:

1) a political regime that pursues policies that are popular in the short run, but unsustainable in the long run; 2) definition of “the people” that are the basis for the legitimacy of the regime; 3) the style of leadership that tends to develop a cult of personality around themselves, claiming the mantle of charismatic authority that exists independently of institutions like political parties. They try to develop a direct and unmediated relationship with the “people” they claim to represent, turning the people’s hopes and fears into immediate actions. Populism of this kind is typically coupled with condemnation of the entire current elite who have invested in existing institutions.

Most approaches to populism focus on the “people” - the majority in society. Therefore, populist policies or slogans are often aimed at claiming rights and better conditions for the people, especially the large but vulnerable part of population. That’s why populism has great appeal and can cause complex political upheavals.

2. Populism in history

Populism is said to have first appeared in the city-state of Athens (Greece) at the end of the 5th century (BC), which is manifested in a democracy with the Athenian Council of Citizens whose decisions express the will of the people. In particular, Cleisthenes, a reformed aristocrat, provided the basics of democracy in Athens. The Athenians since then used the term democracy to describe their political system, along with the people (demos) and power (kratia). Populism thus emerged and flourished in the Athenian democracy and as a result, the people as the major force in society became the leading factor and the dominant ideology (Adamidis, 2019).

¹ Democratic candidates for the 2020 US presidential election.

Populism developed in Russia and the United States in the second half of the 19th century. In Russia, the utopian Narodniks (народники) movement of the intellectuals took place in the period 1860-1880 with the famous slogan “Going to the people” (хождение в народ) (See: Новак, 1997: 84). Their ideology known as Narodnichestvo (народничество) means “populism”, sometimes interpreted as “truly popular”, which aims at building an ideal community for peasants (Urbinati, 2019). It is just a populist movement led by the Russian intelligentsia through a peasant uprising against the tsarist regime at that time. Despite its failure, this movement had a great influence on Russian history in the 20th century (Deiwiks, 2009).

In the United States, left-wing populism emerged from the 19th century and developed until the beginning of the 20th century; meanwhile, right-wing populism developed from the Cold War to the present. Notably, the American populist movement combined with many economic viewpoints along with political parties to become the Populist Party or People’s Party in 1890. Initially, it pursued political progress and left-wing with two populist leaders, John Adams and Samuel Adams, as the people contested the ruling elites in the name of their constitution (Hofstadter, 1956: 4-33), in which the participants were mainly farm owners who demanded taxation of the rich, nationalization of industries, and the establishment of trade unions. Yet, in the United States, populism did not bring about regime changes but has evolved with a wave of political democratization that uses the power of public opinion to enable populist leaders to achieve their personal goals.

John Abromeit (2017: 5) argues that the first hints of populism during this period appeared in Europe as well. The big problem in the perception of populism at this stage was that Fascism was seen as an elite movement that ignored the features fascist ideology in Europe at this time. Some scholars argue that it contributed to the rise of the extreme nationalist movements in France, Germany, and other European countries in the late eighteenth century. However, this view is widely opposed because of the fundamental difference between populism with extreme nationalism and fascism. Some populists representatives appeared in Western Europe in the 1970s and 1980s such as Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain or Helmut Kohl in West Germany. During the period 1980-1990, populism was used to describe the new radical right-wing that emerged in some Western European democracies. Europe’s right-wing populism against “European integration” focuses on such issues as migration, taxation, crime, and nationalism.

Populism also became the driving force behind strong growth in Latin American countries during the 1950s, namely the influence of Getúlio Vargas in Brazil (1930-1950), of Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina (1946-1955, 1973-1974). It can be seen that populism emerged in the process of local socio-economic modernization and is partly associated with a comprehensive vision of society, gathering diverse national identities into common political frameworks. The emergence of populists in Latin America due to high inequality and the weakness of unions has made populism an attractive solution for urban people to manifest their dissatisfaction

(Nguyen Hong Bac, 2019). In the late 1990s, populist trends re-emerged in Latin America, most notably in Venezuela under the rule of President Hugo Chavez (1999-2013). The populist ideology of President Hugo Chavez (Chavism) greatly influenced many countries in South America, led to the rise of leftist forces in Latin America at the time (Torre, 2017: 375-390).

Populism could appear in constitutional democracies with various manifestations. Isaiah Berlin (1968) argues that populism is part of contemporary world politics and signals the transformation of a democratic political system. In democratizing context, populism can become a strategy for rebalancing the distribution of political power among established or emerging social groups (Urbinati, 1998). Populism can change leaders' styles and public discourse even if these are not core values of the ruling elites or are not geared toward constitutional changes. Notably, populism has never functioned as an official part of the performance of democracy. Arditì even employed the metaphor of a parasite to explain its peculiar relation to democracy (See also: Arditì, 2007). In some particular cases, populists are often charismatic leaders and can promote a "cult of personality" that would likely lead to an authoritarian form of democracy. The case is quite popular in several countries in Latin America and Southeast Asia. As such, populism has played its democratic role. But with its reliance on a messianic leader and its repressive tendencies, it also poses a global danger (Postel, 2019: 3).

3. The rise of populism today: Characteristics and impact

In the twenty-first century, many new forms of populism have emerged in the world,

notably Populist nationalism and Neo-populism, which uses highly demagogic political tricks, focusing on influencing opinions, thoughts, and ideas of the masses to call and organize a movement to entice and enlist the support of the people, to help populists gain power, to create big changes in the power balance and change the country's policies to benefit themselves and the interest groups they represent (Mazzoleni, Stewart, Horsfield, 2003: 1-20). The former is a complex evolved form of extreme populism, easily confused with pure nationalism (Bonikowski et al., 2018). Populist politicians currently focus on activities of face-to-face meeting, learning and "listening", "sharing" opinions and aspirations of the majority of the most disadvantaged population group, referendums, or other forms of direct democracy while paying little or no attention to the aspirations and common interests of the entire society. They also take advantage of elected bodies, through debates on agendas, activities of socio-political and professional organizations, rallies, demonstrations, etc. to build influence. Populists aim, by and large, to create a "big picture" and a "strong impression" by using the forms and tricks of "political rhetoric" when stating a demagogic "struggle" strategy, to entice and enlist the masses to serve their purposes. Contemporary populism has a certain positive influence as leaders or ruling elites emphasize public opinion in the policy-making process. Along with that, the populist spirit can promote democracy in the speech and form of the leader's discourse, which can be seen clearly in the case of Narendra Modi (India), Shinzo Abe (Japan), Vladimir Putin (Russia), Donald Trump (USA), etc.

The causes for the rise of “New Populism” are diverse and complex, from politics to economy, from society to culture and even environmental issues, the gap between rich and poor, discrimination against religion, ethnicity, etc. From 2016 onwards, “New Populism” has risen strongly in the US and several European countries with many populists gaining national leadership positions, which led to major changes in domestic and international politics. The main reason is that local people have to face difficulties due to the impact of the economic crisis (world economic crisis 2008-2009) (Poli, 2016), social and security instability, environment, and the passivity as well as the failures of the ruling parties and authorities, in which, notably, degradation, bureaucracy, corruption of state officials, changes in culture and population, etc. (See: Kudors, Pabriks, 2017). From a political perspective, the poor governance of several democratic governments is one of many factors that set the stage for the rise of potential “heroes” who are seen as capable of delivering new futures to the people with their promises and “eloquence”.

In the United States, the right-wing populist movement emerged, drawing several Republicans into a race for power with the Democratic Party. In 2016, D. Trump, who represents the right-wing populist politics in the US, officially won the race for the White House by a series of statements against major news media outlets such as *CNN*, *New York Times*, conveying negative feelings towards elites and the government, with the slogan “America first” to appeal to the American people. In his inaugural address, Trump announced that power would be returned to the people, and the

people would decide their fate. Thus, after 70 years since the Franklin Roosevelt administration, there has appeared a president who despises the policies, ideas, and institutions at the heart of foreign policy in the context of globalization and fierce competition with China (Löfflmann, 2019). Donald Trump has succeeded in focusing the working class in globalization, immigration, American cultural pride - seeing it as the quintessence of progressive culture (Bonikowski, 2019: 110-131).

In Europe, the growth of populism manifest itself through right-wing populist parties such as the Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) with leaders Haider, Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP), Lega Nord in Italy, Republikaner in Germany, Le Pen’s Front National in France, the Danish People’s Party, etc. Populist parties are present in most parliaments, accounting for at least 10% of the votes in 16 European parliaments, and constitutes the largest force in the parliaments of 6 countries (Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, and Switzerland) (Vu Gia Hien, 2019). In Austria, the People’s Party with the most votes (over 31% of the vote) made Sebastian Kurz Chancellor. In France, Le Pen’s National Front had a strong vote, and it was the victory of Prime Minister Mark Rutte in the Netherlands. The populist victories in Europe were achieved by enlisting the support of voters in the spirit of populism. The populist movement in Europe is characterized by the opposition to integration and immigration, criticism of policies in favor of globalization and international integration, and against the idea of placing interests of the European Union (EU) above national sovereignty and interests. Notably, since the Brexit referendum (23rd June 2016), populism

is seen as an opposition movement by xenophobic nationalists from critics of Neoliberalism. In other words, Brexit is the peak of the wave of anti-European ideas and the growth of extreme populism in the first decade of the twenty-first century (Freedon, 2017).

In Southeast Asia, the populist Rodrigo Duterte has been making shocking statements and actions since he took office as President of the Philippines. Apart from large-scale drug crime suppression campaigns, he often criticizes the elites for Manila's inequality in development with other regions, as well as does not hesitate to offend the foreign state leaders. However, the poll results show a high rate of trust among Filipinos for Duterte. That said, he is a truly successful "populist" (Arguelles, 2019: 417-437).

4. Conclusion

Populism, which has long been an ambiguous and controversial concept, has emerged as a phenomenon since ancient times in Greece. It has been of interest from the nineteenth century to the present from several different approaches as the content of fascist dictatorship or a "sideline" issue in Europe and America, but as a fundamental significance in Latin America. In contemporary world politics, populism is the concept and/or the category that is most easily confused with the category of Nationalism. Populism is now seen as a global phenomenon, especially short-lived in some cases (Moffitt, 2016).

The current development of populism is causing some negative impacts worldwide. In capitalist countries, populism promote the construction of a strong "absolutist" state (nationalist), focusing on the tight control over national territory and borders,

and protecting the people's interests. These actions increase internal conflicts and domestic instability, make domestic and foreign policies uncertain, which can be seen clearly in Europe and the US. For foreign affairs, these movements tend to oppose the processes of international and regional integration, even prioritizing separation from multilateral cooperation mechanisms such as Brexit, the US withdrawal from the TPP, and The Paris Agreement on combating climate changes, thereby narrowing opportunities for cooperation, increasing competition and conflict, creating new tensions in international relations such as the US-China conflict (Gruszczynski, Lawrence, 2019). However, objectively, it is necessary to recognize the positive aspects of populism. Populism is supported by a large number of people because it basically meets their needs, although the results are largely unsatisfactory. Populist goals keep aiming to fight injustice or inequality in society, thereby urging the ruling elite to consider these demands. Thereby, these goals are fully or at least partially achieved, contributing to reducing inequality and promoting certain social progress (Hoang Khac Nam, 2019: 200) □

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