

Between Indefinability and Usage. Towards a philosophical understanding of Populism

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Abstract Populism has become a buzzword within the political arena of the twenty-first century. It is near omnipresent in our discourse, most of the time without being tied to any particularly defined conceptualization. This proliferation of populist and meta-populist discourse results in the meaning of the term populism becoming taken for granted without ever resulting in its user's need to feel it necessary to expand on its actual meaning. The aim of this paper is to try to shed some light on the definition of the word populism and its usage. I adopt and apply some tools proposed by Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, namely his idea of family resemblance and meaning as use. Firstly, I will consider populism as a family resemblance term. Instead of trying to entangle populism within a framework of fixed and essential features, populism should be seen as contingent and contextual intertwining of different characteristics which make us immediately recognize a phenomenon as populism. Secondly, I will propose three different uses of populism within academic literature – populism as a classifier, as an admonition and as a descriptor - in order to show how the meaning that we attributed to the term might change according to the usage we make of it. Consequently, each theory of populism advanced should be conceived in light of the scope of the analysis and the specific use we make of the word within political debate. This approach would allow us to maintain the word populism in spite of its lack of a central definition, while allowing a plurality of overlapping and conflictual meanings.

Keywords: Populism, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Family Resemblance, Meaning as Use

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0. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to shed some light on our understanding of Populism and how we employ the word. This article aims to be a philosophical discussion on the definition of populism, in particular, on our inability to define populism, the limits that this inability raises, and its positive effects.

Populism has become one of the most prominent buzzwords in the recent decades of political commentary. Its usage has multiplied in academic literature, political debate, television punditry, and pub conversations during the last few decades. In spite of its massive employment in formal and informal discussions on political matter, there is very little agreement on what populism means and how we should employ it. Often the word populism bears a negative connotation and people or parties categorized as such

usually reject this label or question its meaning. Even among academic literature there is no consensus on the definition of populism, its meaning or description. Starting from this confusion surrounding one of the most employed terms in political discourses, this paper wishes to underpin a philosophical investigation on this political word: more specifically, we will try to frame the word populism within a philosophical linguistic framework which could allow us from one side to directly face the problem of its indefinability, on the other side to highlight its meaningfulness in relation to the use we make of the word. In order to do so, I will introduce some philosophical tools advanced from the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in his late work *Philosophical Investigations*, namely his idea of family resemblance and his idea of meaning as use. In the first part, I will then try to show how the definition of populism acquires new sense when applied to the image of family resemblance as described by Wittgenstein. In the second part, I will show the correlation that subsists between different uses of the term populism and different theories.

Before we dive into the issue let me spend a few words on the decision to appeal Wittgenstein's philosophy of language in order to tackle a dilemma central to political debates but rather marginal in more philosophical works. Moreover, Wittgenstein never openly engaged in political discussion in his works: my choice of applying his philosophical tools to my analysis begs the question on how and why a philosopher of logic and language might help us to clarify our understanding of populism.

While it is almost impossible to find a comprehensive study on Wittgenstein from a political perspective, it is also true that there exists a marginal but increasing number of scholars who are dealing with political philosophy by adopting a Wittgensteinian framework (e.g., Gakis 2018, Crary 2007, Temelini 2015). As those scholars, I share the feeling that through a Wittgensteinian analysis of political issues we might reach a deeper understanding of political phenomena. I believe that there is not only space but also the necessity of enlarging the field of applicability of Wittgenstein's ideas to the political sphere on the basis of one of the most central and controversial intuition of the Austrian philosopher, hence his idea of language as a form of life. Towards the beginning of his *Philosophical Investigation*, Wittgenstein introduces his notion of language-games as his way to stress that «the speaking of a language is part of an activity, or a form of life» (1953: 15). In most cases language is not an abstracted, clean and neat dispositive that we can employ rightfully or wrongly: our way of speaking is always deeply embedded in our daily activities, as well as it is constantly tied up with other speaking beings - alive or not – and state of affairs which are surrounding us. Language is a manifestation of human praxis, which bears its similarities with all the spectrum of other human activities that inform our life as living beings. While on one hand it is impossible to tackle language while including any other manifestation of human activities, on the other hand we cannot ignore the fact that language does not stand isolated but it is deeply intertwined with human psychology, anthropology and of course politology. If we assume politics to be the field of study concerned with institutionalized power relations which arise from shared human activities, then it naturally follows that a philosophical account of language embedded in human praxis could be a useful explanatory device to apply to political theory and, more specifically, to populism.

1. Populism as a Family Resemblance

The idea of treating populism as a family resemblance concept is not new. It has been already proposed by several scholars (Canovan 1981, Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 2005, Sikk 2009): however, they only allude to the family resemblance theory whilst never fully

committing to its application in their work. In this section I wish to investigate this intuition and make it a central point for any possible discussion on the meaning of populism.

Wittgenstein introduces his idea of Family Resemblance as a clue towards an understanding of the meaning of the word *game*. The term game is one of the central ideas of *Philosophical Investigations*, since Wittgenstein employs it as a way to explain his theory of language as a whole in terms of *language-games*. At the beginning of his work, Wittgenstein introduces several examples of language-games, understood as fictional linguistic practice of a simple or primitive kind. Those examples serve the purpose of showing how our more complex language-games, the ones that we use on a daily basis, work in a similar way. He identifies language as a form of life that comprises many or infinite language-games, each of them regulated by its own rules while at the same time being constantly interrelated and sharing affinities with other forms of language-games. At the same time, each language-game represents a «system of communication» (Wittgenstein 1953: 6) which stands on its own without be founded in any pre-existing linguistic ground common to all forms of language. The meaning of a sentence must hence be found in the inter-correlation between the parts forming the sentence, which is regulated by rules, usually dictated by grammar. It is still possible, though, to imagine a dialogue between two individuals which stems from a correct use of grammatical rules. For instance, orders, prayers, songs, poems could all be understood as examples of simple language-games that preserve their meanings in absence of a strict grammatical or logic sequence. Those examples show how the meaning of a sentence, or of a word, must be found in the *usage* that we make of a word and of the coherent use of all the parts of a sentence. In other words, each language we employ could and should be considered as a game following its own rules, serving the purpose of communicability. That is why the notion of game it is at the very core of Wittgenstein's later philosophical works: he uses the word game as an explanatory device in order to make sense of our language understood as a human practice. After having discussed his thoughts on language as language-games, Wittgenstein then turns his attention to the term game itself and its meaning: he describes how everybody knows the turn game and what it is, still when we try to define it we find ourselves in a state of confusion and disorientation. When we are in front of one or more games, we are immediately able to recognize and categorize a certain activity as such; yet, if we look at it more closely and try to sketch one or more common features which are omnipresent to every manifestation of game we will find ourselves in the impossibility of drawing upon any common features or to identify a central core or 'essence'. We know *game*, yet we cannot define it.

Consider, for example, the activity that we call "games". I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games and so on. What is in common to all of them? – Don't say: "They *must* have something in common, or they would not be called "games"- but look *and see* whether there is anything common to all – For if you look at them, you won't see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, affinities, and a whole series of them at that. [...] We see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: similarities in the large and in the small (*ivi*: 36).

It is in virtue of its indefinability that game represents a powerful tool able to shed some light on our understanding of language. The word game cannot be defined, yet can be used in order to define, or at least describe, the intrinsic dynamics at play in our linguistic activities. This interpretation of language based on the indefinability of game might seem at first sight colourful and suggestive, but at a better look it reveals itself to be quite unsatisfactory. We still lack a way to grasp what he called the «complicated

network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing» (Wittgenstein, 1953: 36) presents in each game. In order to make sense of this description, Wittgenstein then introduces the notion of family resemblance, as a metaphorical device able to evoke in us an image that can help us to frame the constant but discontinuous interwoven relations between similarities and ambiguities at play not only in games, but also in language-games.

I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblance”; for the various resemblances between members of a family – build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, and so on and so forth – overlap and criss-cross in the same way – and I shall say: ‘games’ forms a family.

And likewise the kinds of number, for example, form a family. Why do we call something a “number”? Well, perhaps because it has a – direct – affinity with several things that we also call “number”; and this can be said to give it an indirect affinity with other things that we also call “numbers”. And we extend our concept of number, as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread resides not in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.

But if someone wanted to say, “So there is something common to all these constructions – namely, the disjunction of all their common properties” – I’d reply: Now you are only playing with a word. One might as well say, “There is a Something that runs through the whole thread – namely, the continuous overlapping of these fibres” (*ivi*: 36-37).

By appealing to this image of a family picture, Wittgenstein is able to evoke in our mind an intuition that can grasp a larger horizon in which different elements, features or characteristics are presented, constantly changing and switching. It is important to notice, both for a better understanding of the notion of family resemblance as well as for our reflections on the definition of populism, that Wittgenstein does never openly deny a common ground from which all games arise. First of all, all games are activities. But being activities isn’t enough to define them. Secondly, when we engage in this *look and see*, we cannot at first sight trace a common set of features; yet, he never claims that a fixed definition of game cannot be found at all. There is always the possibility that through an analytical engagement in studying all the possible settings that allow a game to be a game we might be able to identify a central fixed set of conditions which are invariable in every game. What is important to notice, is that so far we have not found that central definition, or essence, but we still use the word, and the word maintains its meaning in spite of this lack.

The most important lesson that can be drawn and applied to the word populism is not that it is indefinable *per se* – even if I do believe that we are far from an exhaustive notion of populism – but that its indefinability does not prevent us to give a meaning to this word. The word populism has a meaning even in the absence of a definition. We still employ it and we still give it a specific meaning, even if this meaning could constantly be changed according to different circumstances. As we can see later, its meaning is to be found in the *use* that we make of the word.

2. Populism and its uses

The meaning of a word is to be found in the use we make of the word. I believe that a similar intuition can be applied to our account of populism as we find it within academic literature. In order to show how the employment we make of the term populism determines its meaning, I will propose three conventional uses of populism and their affiliated theories. In the paper *Parties and Populism* (2009), Allan Sikk tries to deal with

the problem of populism as a family resemblance concept and identify three main ways in which the term populism is used within party studies: populism as a *classifier*, as an *admonition* and as a *descriptor*. In this section, I will draw from these distinctions and show how an account of populism might change according to the scope of the authors and its corresponding usage within the political sciences. This description entails a three-folded aim: 1) getting ourselves acquainted with populism as a political phenomenon through the eyes and comments of major political experts; 2) proposing three different pictures of populism among which we can recognize this overlapping and criss-crossing network of similarities and differences that characterize a family resemblance concept; 3) showing how the term populism, while maintaining a certain degree of similarity, might be employed in different contexts and for different uses. Following the latter point, the aim of this section is to show that populism is meaningful even in spite of a clear definition. Its meaning, or meanings, is to be found in the different uses that we make of the word. Furthermore, I claim that the use we make of the term also informs directly the theory or account of populism.

Before we dive into their characterization, I wish to highlight that I consider these classifications highly useful but purely conventional: in fact, most theories of populism already present themselves as a combination of these uses. Nevertheless, I have isolated and I will propose three authors and their reflections that are exemplary of the most common categorical usages of populism utilized within the political studies community, without denying that each of them might present features of the other group in their political enquiry. Again, when dealing with political phenomena and its study it is hard if not impossible to draw a neat separation between different political realities or theories. I would like the reader to approach each of these descriptions as a different picture of populism; by comparing the pictures, we are able to intuit the network of similarities and differences as we find ourselves in front of a family resemblance. An analytical approach to similarities and differences at work among those different pictures would exceed the scope of this article; each of us, in front of a family resemblance's picture, would recognize and identify her own network while embracing the same conclusion, hence that we are in front of a populist phenomenon. At the same time, we can grasp how context and purpose of the analysis mould our perception of populism; each theory highlights specific criteria or features of populism in order to fulfil their scope. All of these pictures of populism manifest a different meaning of populism that change accordingly to the usage we make of the word, in this case within academic literature. In addition, I will try to emphasize the strength and weakness of each theory, revealing the absence and repetition of certain features.

2.1. Populism as a classifier

When we talk of populism as classifier we aim to indicate an account of populism able to distinguish between populist and non-populist parties. For this kind of use, it is important to reach a clear and straight definition that includes conceptual criteria designed to classify populist phenomena. One of the most interesting and successful theories that has been recently advanced about populism as a classifier is the so-called *Ideational Approach*, resulted as a joint effort by a large number of theorists, including Cas Mudde, Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, Kirk A. Hawkins, Ryan E. Carlin and Levente Littvay. According to this theory, populism should be considered «a thin-center ideology that considered society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupted elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people» (Mudde 2004: 253). As we can see from this brief description, the ideational approach mostly focuses on three main features of populism: a) being a thin-centered ideology: b)

the people versus the elite: b) the sovereign power of the people. The ideational approach advances three main criteria according to which we can discern between populist and non-populist movements. In this regard, it is interesting to mention that this approach has been tested on populist discourses in order to recognize populist tendencies among certain political parties, especially in South America, Western Europe, and the U.S.A. (Hawkins & Kaltwasser 2017). The ideational approach has been accused of being too broad and inclusive, henceforth not fully able to discriminate between a pure populist party and a party which may adopt a populist mean of propaganda but which could not in any other sense be fully recognized as such. At the same time, it circumscribes populism only within liberal representative democracies, leaving out many political realities which are usually recognized as populist; for instance, the Narodnichestvo¹ in Russia (Canovan 1980), populism in Ancient Rome (Strauss 2016) and in connection with totalitarian regimes (Germani 1978). The authors' criteria of qualification for this use of populism can be understood on account of the scope of this approach: to propose new tools of analysis on populist parties explicitly within the confines of liberal democracy.

2.2. Populism as an admonition

We can talk of populism as an admonition when we are in front of an account of populism that consider it as a degenerative form inherent to liberal democracies. In this sense, populism is conceived as a dangerous threat that should be contained, since the idea of popular sovereignty is exploited by populist politicians in order to achieve their political agenda.

In his little seminal book *What is Populism?* (Müller 2016), political theorist Jan-Werner Müller provides a description of populism in contemporary politics. At the beginning of his introduction, he acknowledges that «we simply do not have anything like a *theory* of populism, and we seem to lack coherent criteria for deciding when political actors turn populist in some meaningful way» (Müller 2016: 2). His book is therefore an attempt to «recognize and deal with populism» (*ibidem*). The fruitfulness of his book lies in his accurate and insightful account of new populism and its relation to contemporary democracy; yet it is impossible not to notice an intellectual bias against populism in highlighting its negative connotations. At the end of his book, he proposes seven key thesis which can enable us to face the problem of Populism.

1. Populism is an inherent pejorative form of representative democracies.
2. Populism is not only anti-elitist, but also anti-pluralist.
3. They speak in name of the 'real people', understood not as political actor but as a rhetorical entity.
4. Populism appeals to representative processes for political inclusion, such as referenda, but they use them for their political agenda.
5. Populist can govern in name of the 'real people', but they are likely to occupy the government and exclude other political voices.
6. Populism should be recognized as a danger to democracy in itself but should not be excluded from the political debate.
7. Populism is a symptom of the failure of representative democracy and should help addressing moral questions on how to improve it.

¹ With the term Narodnichestvo we refer to a Russian pro-rural movement appeared in the nineteenth century that celebrated the simple life of the 'common people' against the corrupted czarist society (cf. Canovan 1981, Taggart 2000).

Müller, as the scholars behind the ideational approach, engages in populism considering it as a phenomenon that concerns contemporary liberal democracies and dismissing other historical interpretations of populism. Müller's choice to ascribe populism only within representative political theory must be understood in light of the prescriptive attitude of his book. First of all, Müller has his own agenda regarding populism: denouncing it as a degenerative form of politics and propose a specific attitude toward it. That would explain his need to extrapolate and circumscribe populism as phenomenon and to describe it always maintaining representative democracies in the background. Secondly, he does not hide a negative prejudice against any form of populist manifestation. This attitude has been already described by Margaret Canovan, who highlights how most scholars share an intellectual idiosyncrasy against the object of their analysis (Canovan 1981). It is rarely the case that populist movements, parties or even pro-populism intellectuals depict themselves as such. More often, it is scholars within the academia or the media that describe and label populist parties. Borrowing a populist tone, it is *the elite* who describes and analyses populism. Additionally, they usually maintain a negative and distrustful line in their description of the phenomena. This attitude is best exemplified in thesis 3,4, and 5 in which management tools for political representation and inclusion such as referenda are seen as a rhetorical manipulation in order to gain or maintain consent among the electorate. Other scholars have shown as those kind of tools had actually been effective in other populist realities; the Social Credit Party² in Canada has involved mass mobilization in order to consult the people on technocratic and economic measures (Canovan 1980, Taggart 2000, Mudde 2004).

2.3. Populism as a descriptor

The word populism is employed as a descriptor every time we find the word as an explanatory term for the party itself. As Sikk has pointed out (Sikk 2009) this approach is usually rather poor both on an explanatory and normative level, since it employs the word populism as a «shortcut simply to describe certain parties» (*ivi*: 4), often without even providing a loose definition. This employment is habitually found in the 'popular' usage of the word rather than among academics; as Mudde has highlighted, there is a mismatch among the usage of the word populism between academia and in its everyday common use (Mudde 2004: 542-543). Given the scope of this article, populism as a classifier can give us little insight about populist theories. As an alternative, I would rather propose a *descriptive* account on populism, henceforth an analysis of populism which emphasizes its need to clarify the term and propose a thorough analysis of the phenomena able to be the most inclusive and explicative as possible. An excellent example of this attitude is embodied in the work of the political scholars Margaret Canovan. In *Populism* (1981) first and *The People* after, Canovan tries to formulate an account of populism which might be able to shed some light on all the manifestations and degrees of the phenomena. In her earlier work, she does not only enlarge her analysis in order to include populism outside liberal democracies, as her in depth description of the Narodnichestvo movements, but she also tries to tie up populism not only with political movements but, at large, with rural and cultural drives. In *Populism*, Canovan presents to the reader an historical contextualization of populism, focusing mostly on Russian, European, and American cases. Moreover, she suggested a distinction between agrarian and political populism, trying to highlight the different trends that characterizes each stream of populism. What it is more interesting to her

² The Social Credit Party, also known as Socred, is a conservative political party aimed to reform the monetary system enhancing a redistribution of wealth among citizens. (cf. Taggart 2000, Canovan 1981)

classification lies in the fact that she acknowledges that her grouping is fictitious and she encourages the reader to apply a family resemblance model to her analysis: what she proposes is different ranges of populism, among which we should build a network of similarities in order to be able to fully capture populism as a phenomenon in spite of conflicting definitions. In her later book *The People* (2005), Canovan explores the problem concerning the political notion of the people, which can be considered at best ambiguous, and consequently, the problem derived from the application of the notion of ‘the power of the people’, or popular sovereignty. Following her analysis, populism emerges in the space left open by the ambiguity of the people and the issues concerning the embodiment of its will within political institutions. In Canovan’s descriptive case of populism, we can find a brilliant exploration of the root of populism and an exhaustive exposition that exceed the purpose of classification. At the same time, we have to acknowledge that her contextual and descriptive account leaves little room for definitional features, even less for normative grounds on how to limit populism; she even shows a more benevolent attitude toward populism, without disregarding it as a threat or a danger for liberal democracy, but rather as an essential feature of any kind of political reality loosely based on the idea of popular sovereignty.

As we can see from this brief overview, different theories of populism might find an explanation for their definition in light of their role within political discourses. Each theory proposed above maintains its own validity and importance, without nevertheless proposing a universally valid definition of populism; on the contrary, each theory can be better understood in light of the scope that animated the authors while building their own views on the phenomena and, consequentially, how they employ the term within their analysis. In this sense, it might be useful to apply Wittgenstein’s theory of meaning as usage, according to which the meaning of a term must be found in the usage that we make of that word in a given sentence. This intuition of meaning as usage reveals its strength if we think of it once again in relation to games: we learn the meaning of a word once we know how to use it as well as knowing how to play chess once we know how to use and move the pieces on the chessboard (Wittgenstein 1953: 111). This idea of meaning as usage is better understood by contrast to what Wittgenstein called *Augustinian picture of language*, or ostensive definition, namely that the meaning of a word is the object it is referred to.

For a *large* class of cases of the employment of the word “meaning” – though not for *all* – this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.

And the *meaning* of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its *bearer* (*ivi*: 25).

Alongside a more traditional vision of philosophy of language, which directly links the sign of a word with its object, Wittgenstein proposes his insights about meaning. The meaning of a word should not be found in any correspondence between that word and the object, feeling or state of affairs we want to refer to, but rather in the use that we make of a certain word in a specific context or sentence. The meaning of a word arises from the use we make of that word, following rules which regulate our discourses. Meaning as use also implies that our understanding of a word is an activity, which can be successful or not according to our following the rules dictated by both our linguistic grammatical knowledge and the purpose of our communication. We can see that this notion of use is again strictly correlated to a Wittgensteinian formulation of language as a form of life.

Every sign *by itself* seems dead. *What* gives it life? – in use it *lives* (*ivi*: 135).

Looking at the use of the word would allow for a conception of language in terms of a human activity that sometimes exceeds and escapes the imposition of a rigid framework of reference. This approach reveals its strength in relation to the vocabulary of human sciences, and in this case, of political theory. For populism, it might help us to abandon the rush in order to assess its definition while embracing a multiplicity of overlapping and sometimes conflictual meanings. Each meaning is justified and explained on the basis of the use and the scope of the analysis. The connotation that we give to the word populism changes whether we want to categorize a party as such or complaining about it as a danger for political institutions. Looking at the use we make of populism, either in every-day language or academic literature, can give us a deeper insight on its meaning in spite of its lack of a central core definition. I believe that this intuition, combined with the one of the intertwining discontinuity sparked by the family resemblance, can give us a linguistic explanation, from a philosophical perspective, which could merge together the numerous attempts to explain populism that has been undertaken.

3. Conclusion

Despite its massive and increasing usage in political debate, there is little agreement on the definition of populism. Given its fickle nature and its lack of a central core ideology, it is difficult if not impossible to draw a unique and all-encompassing definition of populism which might be able to satisfy all the nuances of the phenomena. As a clue toward a deeper understanding of the word and its employment, I have appealed to some tools formulated by Ludwig Wittgenstein, namely his idea of family resemblance and meaning as use. Respectively, family resemblance provides us with a larger grasp that overcome the indefinability of populism or conflicting theories, whereas meaning as use explains us the meaningfulness of the word while allowing for different meanings and interpretations according to the use we make of the word in a specific context and for a specific purpose. The strength of this notion of family resemblance and meaning as use lies on the fact that it helps us to give sense to an unstable, complex and overlapping framework of different features that cannot be systematically organized in a coherent fixed structure. These intuitions afford us to understand the word populism in spite of its indefinability: it is indeed in this changing, unsystematised, incoherent yet intelligible overlapping of different features that we can have a glimpse of a totality which exceeds any detailed but partial analysis. The meaning of populism should henceforth be found not in a definition but rather in the use that we make of the word. As we have seen, different theories reserved a different use of the word populism; according to the use of the word in their analysis, each theory assumes different shapes and provide us with a different understanding of the word. This approach reveals its strength to the extent that it provides us with a ground to group together different manifestation of populism without relying on a unifying theory or a set of common features; at the same time, it allows for a plurality and multiplicity of different theories, sometimes intersecting, sometime in open conflict with each other. Overall, approaching political theory and its vocabulary in light of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* might provide us with some tools to help us navigate among the incongruences and contradictions that necessarily arise from the study of human activities.

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