

## 7 Populism, Polarization, and Misrecognition

*Christopher F. Zurn*

This chapter recommends recognition theory as one useful tool in the diagnosis of the recent rise in two pathologies of democracy, specifically the surging success of populist politicians and parties across many consolidated democracies, and increases in the social polarization of citizens along partisan lines in several of those nations. Undoubtedly, diagnosing recent populism and polarization is an extensive and multi-faceted endeavour involving both empirical questions about the causes and expected dynamics of these developments, and normative questions about how political movements that increase the energy and engagement of ordinary citizens might nevertheless be properly understood as fundamentally undermining democracy. For present purposes, this chapter will need to background much of this analysis. First, it simply follows much of the literature – without further supporting argument given here – by supposing that populism and polarization are normatively problematic given their de-democratizing and anti-democratic effects when empowered: e.g. governing incompetently, undermining informal yet fundamental democratic norms, disempowering civil society and intermediate associations, substituting demagogic rhetoric and invective for reasoned deliberation, reversing trends towards pluralistic and multi-ethnic inclusion, and hampering broader democratic cooperation throughout society. Second, the chapter takes up only one kind of causal factor among several that would need consideration for a full explanation of the timing and cross-national variance of the rise of such democratic pathologies. Hence, while it seems evident that many types of social transformations must be given their due in a full explanation – in mass media, communications technologies, and political public spheres; in the political institutions of representative democracy; in the relationship between states and economies; and in economic structures impacting labour, globalization, finance, and especially the banking crises and recessions of the first decade of the twenty-first century – this chapter will focus on changes in the recognition order and social-psychological reactions to those changes as key causal drivers fuelling populism and polarization.<sup>1</sup>

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The chapter recommends a recognition theoretic account tying together social changes, moral psychology, and politically powerful social dynamics of identity (Section 7.3). It also argues that recognition theory provides an understanding of the specific political psychology supporting populism and polarization that does not treat the actual supporters as mere passive victims of blind emotion, but rather as motivated by distinctly moral experiences of misrecognition and as making claims for recognition to the broader society (Section 7.4). Before that, Sections 7.1 and 7.2 document and define contemporary populism and identity-based partisan polarization, respectively.

## 7.1 Resurgent Populism

### 7.1.1 Documenting Populism

It is now clear that there has been a significant recent increase in the popularity and influence of populist politicians and parties across a range of different nations with both developed economies and consolidated constitutional democracies. In particular, populism is on the rise in three main regions – Latin America, Europe, and North America – though not as clearly in other regions such as East Asia and Southeast Asia. Populism comes in both leftist and rightist ideological strains, but the most striking gains in both popularity and actual political power recently have tended to accrue to more conservative strains.

Across Europe, the average share of the vote for populist parties in national and European parliamentary elections has more than doubled since the 1960s, from around 5.1% to 13.2%. During the same era, their share of seats has tripled, from 3.8% to 12.8%.

(Norris 2017, 14)

Like decadal trends are evinced in Latin America. But the last years especially have witnessed the striking electoral capture of governments by populists: the League and the Five Star Movement in Italy (2018), Donald Trump in the United States (2016), the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom (2016), Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines (2016), the Law and Justice Party in Poland (2015), Syriza in Greece (2015), Viktor Orbán of the Fidesz-KDNP party and the Jobbik party in Hungary (2010), Evo Morales in Bolivia (2006), Hugo Chávez, succeeded by Nicolás Maduro, in Venezuela (1999). Yet the incidence of populism is variegated, with quite different fortunes even across similar national pairs. Compare populist influence in the United States vs. in Canada, Great Britain vs. Australia, Bolivia vs. Mexico, Austria vs. Norway, the Philippines vs. South Korea. Particularistic explanations of the success or failure of this or that populist or party are clearly insufficient in the face of this recent and widespread, even if variegated, resurgence of populism.

### 7.1.2 Defining Contemporary Populism

I largely follow the work of Jan-Werner Müller and John B. Judis in conceptualizing populism and its two significant variants (Judis 2016; Müller 2016). To begin, I would suggest that we should understand populism in terms of a specific rhetorical logic – a specific way of structuring one’s political pitch to voters – rather than in terms of either ideological characteristics or in terms of demagoguery. To reject ideology as a basis for theorizing populism, one need simply look at the previous list of recent populists to realize they range across almost the full diversity of policy alternatives and value constellations currently available. There simply is no single policy preference, common value orientation, nor any family resemblance cluster of such that could unite these disparate politicians and movements, politicians and movements that we nevertheless have little hesitancy in understanding as distinctly ‘populist.’ Eschewing ideological definitions also makes better sense of the way particular populist politicians evince remarkable policy and ideological flexibility, moment to moment and over time. Alternatively, while demagogic irrationality or overtly emotional appeals may well be characteristic of all those we acknowledge as populist, it simply will not do to distinguish it from most political actors and parties in representative democracies. In short, demagoguery is not the sole possession of populism. Populists are, however, identifiable by a specific form of political appeal that populists alone make when seeking voter support.

With a significant nod to Müller, let me identify four characteristics of the rhetorical logic of populists. First, populism is put forward as an insurgency of ordinary folks fighting against the establishment or the status quo. As an insurgency, political conflict is portrayed as zero-sum: one side or the other will win and winner takes all, with no possibility of mutually beneficial transactions or compromises. Second, that insurgency implies a basic dyad that is crucial to populism – namely, the people versus elites. Elites might be political elites, or economic elites, or cultural elites, or some combination thereof; by contrast, the people are styled as ordinary, everyday people without significant individual power. Yet, as Müller convincingly argues, there is more to the appeal than merely an insurgency of the people against the elites: after all, people’s insurgencies are the characteristic rhetoric of all democratic revolutions (e.g., Müller 2016, 2, 7–11, 20, 22, 38). Yet I think we should hesitate to say that the French or American revolutions were distinctly populist simply because they used the rhetoric of popular insurgency against those in power.

So what else? Third, there is a distinctive kind of moralizing rhetoric. In the populist narrative, elites are portrayed as corrupt and self-serving such that politics becomes a moral crusade against evil or corrupt individuals occupying positions of power. The moral fable continues by painting the people as alone pure and above reproach. Furthermore, there is in this narrative a somehow quasi-mystical entity – the People – that is moralized

as unified, pure, and the ultimate source of legitimacy. There are of course other persons, but they are somehow morally compromised in comparison with the People: impure, inauthentic, fake, evil, or corrupt. Hence on the populist tableau, politics is a moral battle between the good national unity of true citizens against morally deficient but still powerful individuals.

This leads to the fourth key feature, emphasized by Müller as criterial: populist politicians and parties claim to be the exclusive representatives of the People (Müller 2016, 7–40). Proclaiming that ‘only I can speak for the people, I alone represent the People,’ populist politicians exclude any potentially competing claimants to represent either the citizenry as a whole or any subset of it. Hence populism is essentially anti-pluralist: there can be no legitimate opposition, no political opponents who might also raise a legitimate claim to representation. There is only the populist politician or party as exclusive representative of the people, and all others who are designated perforce as fake or illegitimate, morally corrupt threats to the integrity of the people. It is this distinctive combination of four features that I think characterizes populism: (1) an insurgency of (2) the people against elites, where politics is (3) a moral crusade to expunge the morally corrupt from power so that (4) the exclusive representative can rule in the name of the unified People. It is important to point out here that populism as a political rhetoric only makes sense in the context of a representative democracy where the foundational idea is that rulers gain legitimacy only through actually representing the will and preferences of the demos. The populist uses this basic democratic logic in a special way: I/we alone exclusively represent the authentic People and have the exclusive claim to rule as a result of that; all others are simply non-representative.

Let me now turn to an important difference between two forms of populism – two-pole versus three-pole – articulated by Judis (2016, 14–16). It turns out that while dyadic populism is quite typically left wing, triadic populism is right wing. Dyadic populism is formulated around the basic opposition between elites and ordinary people. Triadic populism hinges on an opposition between the authentic people and two opponents: elites and inauthentic, impure, ersatz, or somehow traitorous persons who live among, but are not of, the People. The usual rhetorical logic here is that elites somehow favour or protect these inauthentic persons and their self-serving or positively evil/traitorous goals. Hence along with standard populist fulminations against the corrupt elite, the triadic populist politician must also clearly identify the fake persons, point out the ways they pose a threat to the People, and intimate that elites need to be disempowered in order to neutralize the threat posed by ersatz persons. When he was a presidential candidate for the nomination of his political party, Donald Trump phrased the curious rhetorical bifurcation of the citizenry required for triadic populism rather brilliantly: “The only important thing is the unification of the people – because the other people don’t mean anything.”<sup>2</sup>

Of course, different triadic populists in different nations with different socio-cultural histories and political contexts will pick out different groups of persons to demonize as ersatz and threatening. In the United States, former president Donald Trump's objects of scorn were legion, but he showed a particular fondness for repeatedly identifying Mexican immigrants and Muslims as deep threats to 'real' Americans while using 'dog-whistle' insinuations that African Americans are also threats.<sup>3</sup> Consider that the only three real policy suggestions during his 2016 campaign were (a) 'drain the swamp' (overthrow the corrupt elite power structure in Washington, DC), (b) 'build the wall,' and (c) the 'Muslim ban' (physically keep people of colour from polluting the pure People). By contrast, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines has risen as a geographical outsider running against the corrupt elite ensconced in the metropole Manila and demonizing drug users throughout the population as so evil as to be worthy only of extra-judicial state murder. Nigel Farage, in leading the way to the Brexit vote, attacked both national and transnational elites (Westminster and Brussels bureaucrats) even while inveighing against the "fifth column" of Muslim immigrants intending to "change who we are and what we are" (Mason 2015). Victor Orbán in Hungary has quite successfully combined an anti-Semitic attack on 'liberal internationalist' elites (especially the Hungarian-born George Soros) in the name of the true Hungarian people with an attack on Muslim refugees through forceful strengthening of borders, especially during the European refugee crisis of 2015. I think these examples can be easily multiplied: there is a strong tendency for right-wing populism to make use of the triadic logic that Judis identifies. Said in a less anodyne way, triadic populism, currently resurgent through much of the developed world, is fuelled by particularly toxic forms of exclusionary prejudice, nationalism, racism, xenophobia, and general dehumanization of marginalized groups.

In contrast, left-wing populism tends to revolve around two poles. Consider Chávez in Venezuela: the crux of his 'Bolivarian' revolution is an attack on corrupt capitalist elites but with no clear scapegoating of marginalized third parties as ersatz or traitorous ordinary persons. Evo Morales in Bolivia even more clearly demonstrates the dyadic form of populism: a socialist critique of capitalist and imperialist elites but in the name of an inclusive multi-ethnic, multi-national, people that comprises both indigenous and colonially descended persons. The language of dyadic populism is still that of a popular insurgency engaged in a zero-sum moral crusade with only one person/party exclusively representing the People – and so it is still a deeply anti-pluralist form of democracy – but it tends to lack three-pole populism's reactionary demonization of marginalized groups as somehow a threatening internal presence in the body politic.

## 7.2 Rising Partisan Polarization

A core objective of all forms of populism is the active formation of a unified political identity – the People – and hence the consolidation of all political demands and issues around an oppositional ‘us vs. them’ dynamic. It strikes me that another notable recent political phenomenon – the rise and intensification of social identity-based political polarization – exhibits a quite similar dynamic since such polarization involves tribalistic political loyalties that are structured around zero-sum conflicts between partisan groups. A significant increase in polarization among the public over the last two decades in the United States is an extensively studied and debated phenomenon; my anecdotal sense is that similar dynamics are at play in Europe and Latin America.

I take my cue from Lilliana Mason’s reframing of debates in political science about the extent and character of polarization among ordinary citizens in the United States (Mason 2018).<sup>4</sup> Recent research has pointed to a fascinating divergence: on the one hand, American voters have remained noticeably moderate and unpolarized in terms of their substantive policy positions (Fiorina and Abrams 2008). On the other hand, it seems quite clear that partisan sorting, with high levels of partisan animosity, has elevated substantially amongst the American electorate. Americans increasingly think of themselves on one political team or the other, with increasing identification with fellow partisans and increasing hostility towards those identified with the other political party. In short, we are witnessing the puzzle of a policy moderate population, increasingly polarized by party identity.

To analyze this puzzle, Mason distinguishes between issue-based polarization and ‘social polarization’ based on social identities. While the former indicates divergence between groups of voters based on their attitudes towards policy alternatives, the latter “focuses on people’s feelings of attachment to a group of others” (Mason 2018, 17). Here Mason adopts a relatively simplistic group-focused model of identity and the social dynamics of group conflict: I have a social identity when I identify with a group and invest emotionally in the differences between my group and other groups. Mason’s book opens with a 1954 experiment run on fifth-grade boys, where students were arbitrarily assigned to rival teams and quickly evinced tribalistic emotions, cognition, and behaviours; she repeatedly insists on the analogies between these boys and contemporary American citizens. Both exhibit strong group preferentiality – judging ingroup persons more favourably than outgroup persons – as well as a range of cognitive biases and artificially heightened conflictual affect: “Social polarization is defined by prejudice, anger, and activism on behalf of that prejudice and anger” (Mason 2018, 4).

In a crucial second step, Mason (2018) argues that Americans have increasingly sorted into two teams, where several of their different social

identities all line up together – political party, along with race and ethnicity, class, religion, cultural preferences, geography, and so on. This means both that the membership of the two main parties has become increasingly socially homogeneous and that any of an individual’s social identities – say as a city resident – also acts as a better proxy for one’s partisan identity – as a Democrat. As one’s partisan identity also becomes an overall organizer of one’s other social identities – as politics becomes our ‘mega-identity’ – politics itself becomes less about policy differences and ever more about one’s own team simply being victorious. Recall Trump’s frequently repeated line: “[W]e will have so much winning if I get elected, that you may get bored with winning.” As Mason shows through a capacious data set, political disagreements in the United States are no longer organized by policy differences, but rather by group animus first, where avowed policy preferences are determined largely by team membership rather than policy substance – a tribalistic politics of us versus them, dominated by anger and resentment.

The increased social identity sorting and polarization in American politics Mason identifies are, to my estimate, wholly of a piece with the emotional dynamics driving the recent rise of populism discussed earlier. However, Mason’s simplistic model of identity formation and intergroup conflict gives no deeper explanation of the phenomena she isolates than adverting to general propensities of human psychology: “Humans are hardwired to cling to social groups” (Mason 2018, 9). Further, without such depth and specificity, important further explanatory questions about timing and cross-national comparisons remain under-addressed in her work. Why is this particular bit of human psychology so susceptible to being awakened and used politically now, whereas it was more muted before? Do we see similar increases in partisan identity-based polarization in other nations? Does the timing of increases in polarization and in populism line up, and in different nations?<sup>5</sup> There is a fascinating research agenda here, one that could shed much light on the character of the present political configuration.

### 7.3 Moral Psychology and Social Dynamics

To be sure, decent explanations for the wide yet variegated success of populism across different consolidated democracies and for the increasing degree of us-versus-them partisan polarization would need to factor in a variety of causal factors: changes in the culture, specifically the political public sphere; weakening of traditional governance institutions in representative democracies; economic changes, both longer term (e.g. rising inequality, declining real incomes) and more recent (i.e. financial crises and the Great Recession); and societal changes in the status order that occasion reactionary social responses. As that multi-causal account is well beyond the scope of this chapter, I focus in this section on the last

factor, recommending a recognitional account of the moral psychology and social dynamics of reactions to societal change.

### 7.3.1 *Evaluative Emotions and Social Identity*

Explanations for the rising prevalence of populism will need to refer to some account of political or social psychology since populist politicians and parties typically feed off of and in turn stoke various negative social affects. Supporters of both dyadic and triadic populism are motivated by anger and outrage at corrupt elites and the governing status quo, by anxiety and fear concerning one's material prospects, and by indignation at perceived injustices. Right-wing populism is fuelled by these and by additional social emotions: nostalgia for a presumed past of better prospects and fairer relations, frustration that previously marginalized groups appear to be advancing while one's own group stagnates, resentment of the perceived collusion of elites with disfavoured groups, indignation at perceived disrespect from elites, and, undeniably, varying combinations of exclusionary prejudices such as nationalism, xenophobia, racism, misogyny, and homophobia. Taking a cue from the concurrently rising prevalence of partisan polarization, it seems that decent explanations will also need to account for the greater salience of political group identities and, in particular, a new form of 'mega-identity' analyzed by Mason: an identity strongly committed to zero-sum partisanship that fuses party loyalty with other social identities of race and ethnicity, class, religion, geography, and even cultural tastes.

In short, we need to account for a broad set of powerful moral/evaluative emotions that are playing a key role and to combine this with an account of social identity that can comprehend the group dynamics at work. It seems to me that this is just the kind of combination of moral psychology and social theory that recognition theory is well-suited for. It has a rich picture of the intersubjective location of such evaluative emotions – particularly in terms of the recognition relations between persons – and it systematically connects these evaluative emotions both to individual and collective identities and to potential social and political movements raising claims for better or more complete recognition. Finally, it connects these emotions, identities, movements, and moral claims to an account of social change in terms of transformations in social practices and institutions that are integrated through societally specific recognition orders.<sup>6</sup>

### 7.3.2 *Universal Political Psychology*

One particular advantage of recognition theory is its sensitivity to history, as can be seen in contrast with the problematic timelessness of alternative political psychologies of populism centred around universal human

drives and dispositions (Section 7.5 takes up a second problem with the latter – namely, an untenable methodological denial of citizens' political agency).

Consider first approaches that merely categorize some persons as possessing 'populist' or 'authoritarian' political psychologies and then attempting to correlate those types with voting patterns, as is often done in the popular press (Rahm and Oliver 2016). This is in the tradition of social psychology inaugurated by *The Authoritarian Personality* that slices populations into groups depending on their comparative tendencies towards politically relevant affective dispositions and attempting to explain how those tendencies can be combined and exploited by particular political coalitions (Adorno et al. 1950). Yet such approaches can't help us answer questions such as why populism now (and not at other times)? And why populism here (and not in other places)?

Perhaps we should go straight to depth psychology, such as Fromm's combination of existentialism and psychoanalysis suggesting that, in the absence of old structures of meaningfulness, sadistic and masochistic drives can be skilfully drawn on by authoritarian leaders to overcome individuals' feelings of isolation and uncertainty (Fromm 1941). Or perhaps we might endorse Zaretsky's more recent psychoanalytic suggestion that we should diagnose Trumpism as an id-based reaction on the part of Trump supporters against the superego of rational control represented by technocratic elites (Zaretsky 2016). Perhaps this could be extended beyond the United States to account also for rightist movements in Europe, explaining their extreme distrust of (superego) European Union bureaucratic elites as out of touch with real people. Or finally, maybe we could adopt Mason's relatively simplistic social psychology: a theory of team identification and intergroup conflict as primal human dispositions.

However, all these universalistic psychologies are relatively timeless and placeless: enduring characteristics of human sociality cannot yet explain the relevant *recent* changes in the political efficacy of those characteristics. We need an account that historicizes the phenomena: social-psychological drives or dispositions favourable to populism and polarization may well be permanent possibilities of the human condition, but they have only recently become politically efficacious. Here, recognition theory combined with recent comparative political science of populism can help.

### 7.3.3 *Social Changes in the Recognition Order*

I would suggest that changes in the normatively integrated social order of intersubjective relations, alongside changes in the economy, political structures, and public spheres play a powerful role in explaining the temporality of these troubling phenomena. The idea, in short, is that populism and polarization are fuelled by reactionary responses against the current social status order on the part of those who feel, in the wake of

substantial social changes, that they have been deprived of their previously higher positions in an older status order. In particular, the older status order, predominately defined in terms of patriarchy and white supremacy – though also by majority religion, sexuality, national origin, and first language – was systematically attacked and undermined as a legitimate basis of differential authority by liberalizing and progressive cultural changes, social movements, political parties, and legal structures. Starting in the 1960s, social struggles to overcome the misrecognition of previously excluded, marginalized, or devalued persons, and thereby to establish the social conditions necessary for their due self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem, were carried out through efforts to transform the meanings, symbols, and especially values of the older recognition order. Yet those who benefitted from the privileges of the older system – predominately white men – may in fact resent their loss of status, and this backlash may be energized and put to electoral use by enterprising populist politicians and parties. In short, reactionary nostalgia for a now-displaced social status order rooted in an older system of (mis-)recognition and frustration at the loss of preferential advantage may both be employed, in propitious circumstances, to energize populist politics.

One well-supported version of such an explanation has been put forward by comparative political scientists (Inglehart and Norris 2016, 2017; Norris 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Their basic idea is that since the mid-1960s, there has been, in developed Western societies, a ‘silent revolution’ in values away from a major focus on issues of economic and bodily security and toward ‘post-materialist’ values such as gender equality, toleration of ethnic and racial minorities, acceptance of sexual minorities, environmental protection, human rights, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism. Notably, all of these value transformations (except for environmental protection) are extremely well theorized in recognition theoretic terms. These significant changes have, however, also been accompanied by

a counterrevolutionary retro backlash, especially among the older generation, white men, and less educated sectors, who sense decline and actively reject the rising tide of progressive values, resent the displacement of familiar traditional norms, and provide a pool of supporters potentially vulnerable to populist appeals.

(Inglehart and Norris 2016, 3)

In short, a changing status order prompts backlash, and that backlash is fuel for populism. And of course, the same story could be told about partisan social polarization, as citizens sort their various social identities into great warring camps, enemies in a zero-sum competition between the older and newer value constellations.

This is a parsimonious explanatory strategy: namely, combine an account of permanent possibilities of human social psychology – dispositions toward backlash against social change – with a time-indexed account of why the recent growth of populism now – changes in values subsequent to the new social movements of the last six decades. Norris and Inglehart’s 2019 book provides a multi-causal picture, positing a combination of more recent ‘accelerants’ that have increased the combustibility of cultural backlash against the silent revolution of the ’60s and ’70s. These accelerants are, in particular, “medium-term economic conditions” – namely, a combination of multi-decade inegalitarian changes in the political economy with the effects of the financial crash of 2008 forward – “and the rapid growth of social diversity” (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 14), especially due to growing ethnic diversity and immigration in both Europe and the United States. In short, a perennial psychological reaction, provoked by decadal changes in cultural values, motivates even more voters when inflamed by recent threatening economic and demographic changes.

This account has much to recommend it. First, it performs well in terms of explaining timing, certainly much better than the universal psychologies canvassed earlier. This is because the recent rise of populism, at least in Europe, started already in the 1970s and then surged after the Great Recession (Norris 2017, 9–12) – timing that also lines up with trends in populism in North and Latin America. Second, the story accounts for the widely observed phenomenon that voters do not actually support populism because of any particular ideological vision or coherent policy preferences, nor is support generated by impoverishment or personal economic tribulations. Rather, there seems to be a core set of social emotions, particularly moral/evaluative emotions, playing a key role: anger, resentment, disrespect, frustration, dislike of strangers, and so on. However, I would suggest that the account’s framing in terms of changing cultural values is insufficiently attentive to the ways in which the rise of populism reflects not merely a clash of older and newer values but more deeply a conflict over society’s recognition order as it is incarnated in actual social practices, institutions, and hierarchies. Changes in ‘cultural values’ then also entail changes in the distribution of the material burdens, benefits, roles, rights, obligations, honours, and symbolic goods of social cooperation. Recognition theory promises a more capacious social philosophy that systematically connects values with institutionalized social orders (Honneth 2014).

## 7.4 Substantive Claims for Recognition

### 7.4.1 *Psychological Dopes or Agents of Evaluation?*

Beyond the problem of timelessness, there is a second, and equally serious, problem with the Adorno–Fromm–Zaretsky–Mason line of political

psychologies of populism. In short, each treats supporters of populists as basically powerless clients of their nonconscious psychological drives: they are simply the victims of the ‘populist’ psychological dispositions they are endowed with, or they are compulsively projecting their own traumatic drive conflicts onto political actors, or they are as driven by irrational tribalism as 10-year-old boys when put into all-consuming competition with others. Each of these explanations treats at least some voters as Garfinkel’s ‘psychological dopes,’ marionettes of their nonconscious drives, dispositions, and emotions. Notably, there is usually, in addition, a lack of theoretical parsimony: non-populist citizens are treated as though they have the full gamut of politically relevant capabilities – emotions, yes, but also commitment to values, ability to reason inferentially and weigh evidence, openness to the perspectives of others, desire to cooperate on fair terms with others, and so on – in short, as though they have reasonable political *agency*. Supporters of populism lack such agency, being merely puppets of their overwhelming psychology.

Recognition theory at least holds out the prospects of understanding political actors from the inside, taking seriously both their moral agency and, importantly, considering their stories at face value as making cognizable moral claims. Since the relevant emotions are not simply pure affect but have both conative and evaluative components, and since these sentiments are accompanied by explanatory narratives and evaluative judgements about the rightness and wrongness of social life, it behoves the theorist to take these elements of self-understanding seriously and interpret them as such – rather than explaining them away as mere emanations of unacknowledged and nonconscious psychological drives. Further, a signal strength of recognition theory is that it does not stop at individuals’ moral emotions provoked by interpersonal relations. Rather, it has a developed social theory that explains the dynamics of struggles for social change: when individuals realize that their personal feelings of disrespect are shared by others similarly situated to themselves, the potential exists for developing a movement that goes from individualized outrage to organized social pressure in order to overcome perceived structures of unjustifiable misrecognition. Further, individuals involved are likely to develop social identities where they are invested in and motivated by the similar experiences they have of misrecognition, and they use the collective strength of that social identity to militate for change in the broader society. Note the contrast between this rich account of social identity formation that treats individuals as real agents of their own lives, and Mason’s simplistic account of primal, timeless, and atavistic urges toward intergroup separation and conflict.

#### 7.4.2 *Populism’s Manifest Content*

What then is the manifest content of populism’s recognition claims, or better, what are some of the claims that various supporters of populists

make? Dyadic and triadic populists in the United States provide some exemplary claims, even if not fully representative.

Consider first the self-definition of left-wing populists who spurred a remarkable set of social movement protests in both the United States and around the world:

**Occupy Wall Street** is a leaderless resistance movement with people of many colors, genders and political persuasions. The one thing we all have in common is that We Are The 99% that will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of the 1%.

(Anonymous 2018b)

Occupy Wall Street is a people-powered movement that ... is fighting back against the corrosive power of major banks and multinational corporations over the democratic process, and the role of Wall Street in creating an economic collapse that has caused the greatest recession in generations. The movement is inspired by popular uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, and aims to fight back against the richest 1% of people that are writing the rules of an unfair global economy that is foreclosing on our future.

(Anonymous 2018a)

These statements have almost all of the hallmarks I identified in Section 7.1.2 of classical, dyadic populism: an insurgency of ordinary people versus elites, where political action is a moral crusade to expunge the morally corrupt from power so that the will of the unified people can rule. The only missing element – and it is a crucial one that distinguishes Occupy as a social protest movement from organized electoral politics – is the claim of a party or charismatic candidate as the exclusive representative of the people. But further, and importantly here, there is a clear expression of not only strong emotions – frustration and outrage – but also an accompanying set of cognizable moral-political claims. Hence, this example of populism is not a simple function of nonconscious affects, emotional drives, or atavistic tribalism but is rather formed through a reason-based and cognitively evaluable set of demands for social justice. Those moral claims and demands deserve to be evaluated at face value, even when we as theorists are trying to explain the changing fortunes of various types of politics.

Much the same can be said for supporters of triadic versions of populism. A remarkably powerful source for their claims can be found in Arlie Hochschild's in-depth five-year ethnography of Tea Party supporters in Louisiana, aptly titled *Strangers in Their Own Land* (Hochschild 2016b). She was interested in exploring the political emotions of her interlocutors – particularly their anger at and hatred of the federal government – and importantly, understanding those emotions from the inside by seeing how

they connect their everyday life experiences with their political claims about the problems with both national and local governments. After her fieldwork, she drew up a representative ‘deep story’ which her subjects then strongly endorsed as, in fact, their own story.

This ‘deep story’ clearly demonstrates much of what this chapter has addressed: the rhetorical structure of populism, the structure of mega-identity partisan polarization; concerns about changes in the recognition order of society, the motivating force of politically relevant social emotions, and, finally, the crucial importance of a set of clear normative claims seen as justifying the appropriateness of those emotions.

You are patiently standing in a middle of a long line leading up a hill, as in a pilgrimage. Others beside you seem like you – white, older, Christian, predominantly male. Just over the brow of the hill is the American Dream, the goal of everyone in line. Then, look! Suddenly you see people cutting in line ahead of you! As they cut in, you seem to be being moved back. How can they just do that?

Who are they? Many are black. Through federal affirmative action plans, they are given preference for places in colleges and universities, apprenticeships, jobs, welfare payments, and free lunch programs. Others are cutting ahead too – uppity women seeking formerly all-male jobs, immigrants, refugees, and an expanding number of high-earning public sector workers, paid with your tax dollars. Where will it end?

As you wait in this unmoving line, you’re asked to feel sorry for them all. People complain: Racism, Discrimination, Sexism. You hear stories of oppressed blacks, dominated women, weary immigrants, closeted gays, desperate refugees. But at some point, you say to yourself, you have to close the borders to human sympathy – especially if there are some among them who might bring harm.

You’re a compassionate person. But now you’ve been asked to extend your sympathy to all the people who have cut in front of you. You’ve suffered a good deal yourself, but you aren’t complaining about it or asking for help, you’re proud to say. You believe in equal rights. But how about your own rights? Don’t they count too? It’s unfair.

Then you see a black president with the middle name Hussein, waving to the line cutters. He’s on their side, not yours. He’s their president, not yours. And isn’t he a line-cutter too? How could the son of a struggling single mother pay for Columbia and Harvard? Maybe something has gone on in secret. And aren’t the president and his liberal backers using your money to help themselves? You want to turn off the machine – the federal government – which he and liberals are using to push you back in line.

(Hochschild 2016a, 16)

The translation of this hermeneutic into political activity is not hard to understand: strong support for an insurgent outsider who promises to rewrite the story, to overthrow the corrupt federal government, to turn back the clock to the old status order, to make the economic line 'fair' for the older aspirants by excluding the line-cutters, all the while expressing anger towards the progressive elite and their clients for their sneering disrespect towards the traditions and honour of patriarchy and white supremacy – a politician sailing under the banner 'Make America Great Again.' As Hochschild puts it, "To white, native-born, heterosexual men, [Trump] offered a solution to the dilemma they had long faced as the 'left-behinds' of the 1960s and 1970s celebrations of other identities. Trump was the identity politics candidate for white men" (Hochschild 2016b, 229–230).

Supporters of populism – just like any citizen with politically relevant opinions – deserve to have those claims evaluated on their face rather than explained away; I turn next to the substantive morality of recognition theory to do just that.

### *7.4.3 Misrecognition and Populism*

I can now clarify how the manifest content of both of the previous stories can be illuminatingly interpreted through recognition theory. In particular, both sets of agents are collectively experiencing certain evaluative emotions, emotions they take to be justified indicators of misrecognition evident in the current social order, where they thereby raise claims to the broader society that social transformations are required to overcome current forms of misrecognition. It is important to stress here that simply making a claim about normatively appropriate recognition does not automatically justify that claim; even less does simply experiencing and collectively expressing an evaluative emotion thereby justify a claim that one is in fact misrecognized.

Begin with the Occupy story. The vast majority of ordinary people collectively realize that their political institutions and their economic institutions make various promises that they are not fulfilling. In particular, government makes promises first about democratic forms of collective decision-making but in fact cannot make good on such promises because they have been captured by a small slice of the wealthiest people. In short, the '99%' experience the institutional misrecognition of being denied the appropriate respect as equal democratic citizens. In addition, a capitalist economy promises both a stable environment for meeting individuals' material needs and a fair distribution of the burdens and benefits of social cooperation. But the actually institutionalized economy has not made good on these promises, as witnessed by a global financial collapse caused by a small slice of the wealthiest people who nevertheless did not bear the costs of their own economic risks. In short, the '99%' experience the

institutional misrecognition of being denied the social conditions of appropriate concern as materially needy individuals and of appropriate esteem as productive participants in a capitalist economy. Notably, despite the radicality of the ways in which they organized and protested, Occupy Wall Street, on my reading at least, did not challenge the fundamental values of the current recognition order nor the promises that the institutional orders make in the light of that recognition order: they essentially called, rather, for the actualization of real democracy and fair capitalism.

Turning now to the ‘deep story’ of waiting in line for the American dream, it is perhaps even easier to read its various evaluative emotions as moral recognition claims. Begin with claims about straightforward misrecognition: there is a proper process for advancing towards social and economic fulfilment, but only some (the line-sitters) are required to obey those rules, while others are allowed to unfairly disobey them (the line-cutters). Second, according to the appropriate recognition order, sympathy is not owed universally to all, especially since individuals cannot be expected to sacrifice for all those who might be disadvantaged. Compulsory taxation to support all others compounds the misrecognition. Third, there is the claim that line-sitters are not appropriately esteemed for their honourable lack of complaining about their own hardships, while others do receive esteem for their hardships from “racism, discrimination, sexism.” The line-sitters claim, fourth, that the promise of getting ahead by patiently obeying the rules is not being fulfilled by the economic and political systems since ‘you seem to be being moved back’ rather than forward in line. Fifth, there is also the outrage that the government is not fulfilling its promise of fairness and equal rights for all, as it is positively helping the line-cutters to get ahead. Finally, there are two misrecognition claims that indict the current recognition order itself as deficient. There is the claim, sixth, that certain categories of persons should not even be in the line in the first place; specifically that blacks, women, immigrants, refugees, gays, and public-sector workers should not be respected or esteemed on an egalitarian basis. Seventh, this form of misrecognition through deficient values is evinced paradigmatically in a black person with a Muslim-identified middle name being able to graduate from prestigious universities and even be elected president of the United States. To add insult to injury, as it were, Obama is ‘waving to the line-cutters. He’s on their side, not yours.’ These last two claims of Hochschild’s deep story morally indict the recently changed recognition order itself, registering, rather, a strong preference for the older patriarchal and white supremacist status order.

It is not my purpose here to evaluate these many different misrecognition claims for their cogency and justifiability. That is the job of public participants, intersubjectively evaluating the reasons and arguments which might be proffered in defence and critique of various substantive political claims made in the public sphere. It is perhaps enough to observe,

first that diverse populists make diverse claims and, second the noncompossibility of all these claims, particularly those endorsing the currently regnant, inclusive, anti-patriarchal, and egalitarian recognition order and those rejecting it in the name of an older, exclusionary, patriarchal, and supremacist recognition order.

## 7.5 Conclusions

What then does recognition theory contribute to our understanding of populism and partisan identity-based polarization? I have tried to suggest that, first, it provides a more convincing social psychology of some of the motivations behind the enthusiastic support of populist candidates: they are rooted in morally saturated emotions that refer to collective experiences of misrecognition. People are not merely emoting or responding to deep nonconscious drives or being pushed around by tribalism when they express support for insurgent candidates promising to root out elite corruption and restore popular rule. Second, recognition theory provides a convincing social theory of the importance of group identity to the structure of current political movements: social identity is forged through shared experiences of misrecognition and a desire to overcome unjustified treatment, which can be organized into politically efficacious solidaristic movements. It is not just a matter of being artificially separated into teams and then letting the deep and permanent tribalistic components of our basal motivations take over. Group identity is forged rather in collective moral struggles for appropriate recognition involving social processes of hermeneutic articulation and solidaristic collective action.

A recognitional approach also sheds light on questions like why populism and polarization now, and why in some places but not in others? As we saw in the discussion of Inglehart and Norris's research, a key component to the timing of rising triadic populism since the 1970s across the developed nation-states is collective reactions to the revolutionary overturning of an older, more patriarchal, and supremacist recognition order, anchoring more egalitarian values in social practices, institutions, and hierarchies. What Hochschild's deep story makes clear is that – at least from the participant's perspective of moral agents making claims about the misrecognition involved between the various groups in line for the American dream – a very substantial reason for the resurgence of right-wing populism must be traced causally to the changing status order that allowed for formerly excluded persons to 'get in line' in equal pursuit of the American dream. Yes, the story also includes moralized anger at the perceived disrespect felt in the political public sphere, moralized anger at the corrupt government and its lazy clients, and moralized anger at the economy and its elite beneficiaries. But the moral claims raised in the deep story are centrally structured around a demand to return to an older status order that had a clear hierarchy of differential recognition for

persons with different ascriptive characteristics: where non-whites and women, above all, knew their ‘proper’ place (in a different and subordinate line altogether) and where they were actively and justifiably kept there. To be sure, the concurrent rise of dyadic populism shows that the changing recognition order cannot be the only causal factor involved. Changes towards the tribalization of the mass media, towards the dedemocratization of the formal institutions of politics, and especially longer- and shorter-term economic changes disempowering the working class and empowering the rich surely have all had important impacts. Hence, the central role I have given to the changing recognition order should be seen as entering into a fateful reinforcing causal dynamic with other types of causes. A combustible mix indeed, potentially turning the engaged use of democratic political freedom into its opposite: anti-democratic politics on the way to authoritarian political unfreedom.

## Notes

- 1 An earlier and longer draft of this chapter sketches my approaches to both the normative assessment of, and the multi-pronged causal explanation for, rising populism and polarization. I am very thankful for invaluable feedback provided by participants at conferences in Helsinki (2018), Prague (2017), and Dublin (2016) on these earlier drafts, as well as to the editors of this volume for their insightful assistance. I have not brought all the references to current events up to date from 2018, believing that the basic political phenomena I am pointing to here of resurgent populism and polarization are still quite evident in mid-2021, even as the material circumstances of the world have changed so dramatically in the three intervening years. I leave it as an exercise to the reader to supply the contemporary headlines that continue to demonstrate the problematic anti-democratic influence of populism and polarization.
- 2 May 7, 2016, cited in Müller (2016, 22).
- 3 It is insufficiently remarked upon that Trump first made his career as a politically relevant public figure (as opposed to a real estate mogul) through perpetuating racist falsehoods concerning the ‘Central Park Five’ and the ‘birther’ calumny against Barak Obama.
- 4 I am focused specifically on polarization among the citizenry and not on polarization among elected officials since the latter is heavily influenced by the specifics of individual parliamentary systems.
- 5 To be clear, Mason has no ambition to do cross-national comparisons; her work is focused on the American political context alone. And while Mason does indeed begin to address the timing questions with a particularistic history of US party re-alignments, I find the approach undertheorized and inapplicable to comparative work.
- 6 There is much literature here, but one could hardly do better than Honneth (1995) as the *locus classicus* of recognition theory.

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