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Forget Populism!

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This paper intervenes in the debate about the so-called 'populist danger', whose proponents claim that populism constitutes a threat to democracy, European integration, the West, the liberal international order, or all of the above. This paper argues that this argument is severely misguided – with significant consequences for research and political practice. The core problem is that claims of a 'populist danger' are based on an exceptionally vague conceptualization of populism that fails to clearly distinguish between left and right, moderate and radical, authoritarian and genuinely democratic versions. In doing so, they not only ignore decades of populism research but also create the impression that actors like Bernie Sanders, Donald J. Trump, Victor Orbán, Marine Le Pen, the Greek Syriza and Spanish PODEMOS (who in fact pursue vastly different and even outright contradictory policy goals) are all variations on a single (populist) theme. Moreover, because advocates of the 'populist danger' thesis like Jan-Werner Müller insist that populism *as such* is inherently anti-pluralist, they hamper efforts to meaningfully distinguish between threats to be countered and legitimate complaints to be taken seriously. This is not just of purely academic interest because any policies based on such an understanding of populism are bound to fail – and potentially backfire. Against this background, the article argues that populism *as such* is neither inherently anti-democratic nor per se democratic, and using the term to assess the potential dangerousness of certain actors is highly problematic.

Keywords: populism; democracy; liberal international order; conceptual stretching; Jan-Werner Müller

Introduction

Populism, it seems, is the talk of the town these days. Although hardly a new topic in the social sciences (see Ionescu and Gellner 1969, n.a. 1968), in particular general public interest has exploded during recent years. Aside from a (perceived or actual) increase in political actors who challenge elites of various kinds in the name of ‘the people’ (Judis 2016, Moffitt 2016), this is mainly due to the widespread fear, voiced by policymakers, journalists and scholars alike, that these so-called ‘populists’ and the ideologies they represent are a threat to democracy, European integration, ‘the West’, the liberal international order (LIO) or all of the above (e.g., Colgan and Keohane 2017, Drezner 2017, Fukuyama 2017, Müller 2016).

The main purpose of this short piece is to argue that the majority of studies on the so-called ‘populist danger’ (Müller 2018) suffers from a severe case of ‘conceptual stretching’ (Collier and Mahon 1993, Sartori 1970). That is, the term populism is used in such a vague, indeed cavalier way that it has become impossible to distinguish populism from related phenomena – with severe consequences for both analysis and political practice. Because of insufficient conceptualization, contributors to the debate regularly lump together left and right, moderate and radical, authoritarian and genuinely democratic actors. Moreover, by insisting that populism *in toto* is a danger, they undermine any meaningful distinction between threats to be countered and legitimate complaints to be taken seriously. Any policies based on such an understanding of populism are bound to fail – and potentially backfire.

Given this, I argue that it is high time to drop the populism label. To be sure, I am not saying we should abandon populism research altogether. Populism is a useful concept if we want to understand how certain parties, movements or individual leaders manage to attract support (Laclau 2005). It is however not useful if we want to understand which actors are a danger to,

say, democracy, Europe, the West or the LIO. In fact, by using the label ‘populism’ for both, openly racist, xenophobic, misogynistic, corrupt, authoritarian and/or violent actors such as Donald J. Trump, Viktor Orbán, Rodrigo Duterte, Marine Le Pen or the German *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) on one hand and democratic actors like Bernie Sanders or the Greek leftist party Syriza on the other, we play down the danger posed by the former and dramatize the latter.

Everyone’s a Populist – and Dangerous, too

As Jan Zeemann has aptly observed, much of the media discourse on populism proceeds according to the motto “when in doubt, call it populist” (Zeemann 2019: 26). Unfortunately, the same can be said about much of the academic discourse about the ‘populist danger’, much of which relies on exceptionally vague terminology.

Conceptual stretching in the literature on the ‘populist danger’ appears in two basic variants. A first group of studies either does not define populism at all or in such imprecise terms that a broad range of actors with partly incompatible ideologies fall within the category, which then *in toto* is declared dangerous. For example, in an article in *Foreign Affairs*, Fareed Zakaria (2016: 9) attests populism a ‘suspicion of and hostility toward elites, mainstream politics, and established institutions’, listing Sanders, Trump, Syriza and the right-wing extremist French *Front National* (now *Rassemblement National* – RN) as examples. Because of populism, Zakaria sees the West is ‘in trouble’ (ibid.). Quite similarly, Jeff D. Colgan and Robert O. Keohane claim that populists are characterized by the ‘belief that each country has an authentic “people” who are held back by the collusion of foreign forces and self-serving elites at home’ and sought ‘to weaken or destroy institutions such as legislatures, judiciaries, and the press’ (Colgan and

Keohane 2017: 36). In the same vein, Joseph S. Nye loftily proclaims that 'the liberal international order is a project of just the sort of cosmopolitan elites whom populists see as the enemy' (Nye 2017: 14) and G. John Ikenberry (2018: 7) bemoans the proliferation of 'populist, nationalist and xenophobic strands of backlash politics' – without distinguishing between the three.

A second group of studies (re-) defines populism to make it fit the current media debate. Here, the works of Jan-Werner Müller (2016) are a prominent example (but see also, e.g., Fukuyama 2017). For Müller, populism's distinctive feature is the 'claim that they [populists] and they alone represent what they usually call "the real people" or "the silent majority."' Populists thus declare all other contenders for power to be illegitimate' (Müller 2019: 35). Because of that, populism is always anti-pluralist and antidemocratic (also Plagemann and Destradi 2018, Destradi and Plagemann 2019). The main problem with Müller is that he sets out to define populism in such a way that it fits the media debate, all the while ignoring populism research. Although Müller does not deliberately lump together actors, he still fails to clearly rule out which actors do *not* belong in the category. Thus, while considers many so-called populists to be (harmless) social democrats (Müller 2019: 19, fn. 1), he does not clearly specify whom he has in mind. Is Jeremy Corbyn, whom he cites, a populist or a social democrat? In which category do the Greek Syriza and the Spanish PODEMOS fall? Given that populism functions as a catch-all term in the general public discourse, Müller's failure to clearly rule out certain actors reinforces the impression that all actors commonly considered populist are (equally) dangerous. It does not help that Müller insists that both right- and left-wing populists are inherently anti-pluralist (Müller 2019: 19, fn.1) – all the while citing almost exclusively examples from the right. Despite explicitly setting out to provide much-needed clarification, Müller ends up only adding to the confusion.

This conceptual quagmire could have been avoided had the advocates of the ‘populist danger’ more seriously engaged with populism research, which is significantly more differentiated. Whether one understands populism as a specific form of discourse (Laclau 2005), a ‘thin-centered ideology’ (Mudde 2007: 23) or a style (Moffitt 2016), researchers agree that populism as such usually does not have a specific content. What makes populism populism, at the risk of over-simplifying a bit, is anti-elitism combined with demands for the restoration of popular sovereignty (see the discussion in Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). Thus, if we understand populism, to pick one particularly influential definition, with Cas Mudde (2007) as an ideology, it resembles more a ‘skeleton’ (Stengel et al 2019: 4) that needs to be combined with the ‘flesh’ of substantive host ideologies such as liberalism or socialism to form a complete ideological ‘body’. Thus, populism researchers usually differentiate between different types of populism, e.g., inclusive and exclusive, left and right, radical and moderate, which often have vastly different or even contradictory policy goals (Hawkins 2016, March 2017, Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013).

As a consequence, from the perspective of the bulk of academic research on populism, it makes about as much sense to argue that populism is a threat to democracy as it makes to claim that campaign posters are dangerous. After all, criticism of detached and/or corrupt elites and demands to restore popular sovereignty can be an expression of both (illegitimate and harmful) anti-pluralist demagoguery and a (legitimate and constructive) critique of an actual democratic deficit. As a consequence, the vast majority of academic research on populism rejects the idea that populism as such is *per se* dangerous or good. With the exception of Ernesto Laclau (2005) and Chantal Mouffe (2018) who would like to reserve the populism label for emancipatory projects (the exact opposite of Müller’s position), these researchers would argue

that whether specific populist actors or the ideologies they argue for are dangerous depends on what populism is combined with.

Things get even more complicated when we turn our attention to what populism is supposedly dangerous *for*. Democracy for instance continues to escape attempts to define it (Markoff 2011). Like Europe, the West and the liberal international order (Acharya 2017, Hellmann and Herborth 2016), what exactly it means is contested, and whether something or someone is a threat to it depends on what exactly we consider democracy to be about. What this means in the context of debates about the 'populist danger' is that we need a more differentiated picture not only of different populisms but also of what exactly purported populists oppose (or not). For while all populists by definition oppose *some* aspects of the status quo, what *exactly* (say, democracy, capitalism, or multilateralism) they oppose makes all the difference.

Let us consider the example of Euroscepticism. On the surface, the RN, Syriza and the rather eclectic Italian Five Star Movement seem united in their opposition to the European Union (EU). However, a closer look reveals them to do so for quite different reasons, and that makes all the difference if the aim is to assess the danger they pose to European integration. The FN is opposed to the EU because of its nativist ideology (Ivaldi 2018), the Five Star Movement is motivated primarily by the party-political aim to win elections (Marone and Salvati 2015), and Syriza's criticism of the EU is fuelled by its opposition to its neoliberal austerity policies (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). In the context of debates about the 'populist danger', this is crucial: Only the RN's position is one of hard Euroscepticism, a fundamental opposition to the EU as such, whereas the Five Star Movement presents a case of soft Euroscepticism (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2004). In the case of Syriza it is even questionable to what extent this is Euroscepticism at all. After all, Syriza is not opposed to the EU itself but to the contents of

its policies. Principled opposition to all things European is not the same danger to European integration as is opposition to specific policies, and it would be misleading and counterproductive not to differentiate. Conflating the two is comparable to seeing any criticism of Donald Trump as an expression of anti-Americanism; it is a categorical error.

Quite similarly, actors can either oppose democracy as such, different elements of liberal democracy such as the rule of law or human rights, or its usual close association with a 'free' (*i.e.*, relatively unregulated) market economy. Depending on whom one asks, not all of the above-cited elements are necessarily equally worth protecting. Thus, some political theorists argue in favour of radical democracy as a contender to our current representative system (Mouffe 2000), and the benefit of neoliberal capitalism is at least debatable (see Brown 2015, Magdoff and Foster 2011: ch. 3). Similarly, what does opposition to the liberal international order actually entail? Being opposed to multilateral institutions, to U.S. leadership, to 'free' trade, to democracy or to all of the above? Thus, it is perfectly possible that some actors oppose the current world economic order but still support multilateral institutions. Different types of populists will likely oppose different elements of the international order. For instance, inclusionary populists are more likely to be open to international cooperation than exclusionary ones with a nativist ideology (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013), and lumping them together hampers understanding more than it helps.

The Practical Consequences of Conceptual Stretching

Now, why is this relevant for policymaking, and what should we do about it? The way the populism label is employed in current debates about the 'populist danger' has significant practical consequences. First, and most obviously, it undermines the ability to formulate

adequate policies. The problem here should be readily apparent: Any analytical concept that is designed to assess different actors' dangerousness to, say, democracy but at the same time lumps social democrats like Sanders together with the right-wing extremist RN (or fails to clearly distinguish between them) cannot possibly have any analytical or practical value. Translated to policy recommendations, it is a recipe for failure.

Second, failure to distinguish between different types of populists also leads to a simultaneous dramatization and playing down of the danger posed by so-called 'populists'. By lumping together left and right, moderate and radical actors and ideologies, advocates of the 'populist danger' dramatize the threat that many actors on the left actually pose. Treating Sanders, Syriza and Podemos as essentially of the same ilk as Trump, Orbán and Le Pen severely delegitimizes the former.¹ One does not have to agree with Sanders's policies, but one would be hard-pressed to find any evidence for the thesis that he is a danger to US democracy.

On the flipside, using the label populism for openly racist, misogynistic, corrupt and/or authoritarian leaders or parties like Trump or Orbán plays down the danger they pose. The problem with these actors is not that they criticize elites – the problem are the anti-democratic and/or inhumane policies they pursue. Trump, who has openly praised dictators, encouraged his supporters to use violence, threatened to jail political opponents, continues to attack an independent judiciary and US law enforcement agencies, and detains refugees in internment camps, among other things (Mickey et al 2017), is a case in point. Calling him (let alone self-declared Hitler aficionado Duterte) a populist is a euphemism. To be clear, this is not to say

¹ Indeed, if one follows Colin Crouch's (2019: 126) argument that in contemporary liberal democracies 'the vital energy of the political system' has 'disappeared into small private circles of economic and political elites', authors like Müller might ironically end up doing the exact opposite of what they aim to do, namely defending a *post*-democratic system not only against anti-pluralist tendencies but also against attempts to (re-) democratize it.

that there are no dangerous actors on the left either; Hugo Chavez certainly was not the poster boy of democratic governance. But there is a reason why Müller relies mainly on examples from the right; it is because right-wing authoritarians currently present the gravest threats to democracy.

At least two consequences need to be drawn from this: First, as far as potential dangers are concerned, it is time to abandon the populism label. As Michael Minkenberg (2018: 349) has rightly observed, most of the actors currently called right-wing populists used to be called the radical right or right-wing extremists, so why not call a spade a spade (Stavrakakis et al 2017)? Second, policymakers, journalists and scholars alike need to get a grasp on and articulate more clearly what individual 'populist' actors are actually opposed to instead of making wholesale judgments about them being a danger to democracy or world order as such. It is only on the basis of sound, differentiated concepts that we can separate threats to be countered from legitimate demands to be taken seriously. The current debate on the 'populist danger' has become an obstacle to systematic analysis and effective political action. Time to let it go.

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