



SYMPOSIUM: POPULISMS IN THE WORLD-SYSTEM

Regrounding Populism: Moving Beyond Questions of Definition and Content

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Abstract

While conventional studies of electoral populism acknowledge that such mobilizations are linked to significant economic crises, their preoccupation with defining what exactly populism is often leads them to downplay the unified structural roots of different sorts of populist mobilizations. This essay presents the beginnings of an alternative framework for the study of electoral populism that draws on the neo-Gramscian theory of political articulation that links studies of global economic crises with conventional theories of populism. While crises are an endemic feature of global capitalism, their political manifestation is shaped by the varied institutional structures and legacies in which they are translated.

Keywords: Political articulation; Gramsci; Strategic depoliticization; Economic crisis

The unpredicted success of the numerous candidates, parties, and movements colloquially labeled as ‘populist’ has reignited both academic and popular interest in the broader concept of populism itself. Noting the proximately concurrent rise of these various characters and movements, many



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political commentators have come to suggest that we are living through an “age of populism” (Krastev 2007), revitalized “populist moment” (Galston 2017) or “populist zeitgeist” (Mudde 2004). Others similarly argue that these various international, and seemingly independent cases are part of a larger “populist explosion” (Judis 2016), or cresting “populist wave” (Mudde 2016) set off by the 2008 financial crisis (Aslanidis 2018, Kreisi and Pappas 2015). These accounts collectively argue that this episode of dramatic social upheaval effectively upended many widely held political assumptions and expectations, undermining the institutional foundations of these various democracies in the process. Consequently, widespread resentment toward the political and economic elites many believe responsible for the 2008 crisis has culminated in the anti-establishment backlash that has opened the door for a series of charismatic illiberal leaders who claim to speak for the true interests of some amorphous and vaguely defined notion of “the people.”

While the theoretical groundings of these works vary, their overall conclusions and analytical orientations generally lead them to fall within one of two schools of thought. One centers on the economic roots of populism, emphasizing the political consequences of substantial economic transformations related to the continued processes of globalization (Rodrik 2017) and consequential changes to the workforce and related labor market prospects (Hacker 2006). According to this view, “rising economic insecurity and social deprivation among the left-behinds has fueled popular resentment of the political classes” (Inglehart and Norris 2016: 2). The second emphasizes the cultural aspects of populism, arguing that that this most recent wave of populist movements and candidates is largely part of a continued reaction against progressive cultural change—or lack thereof outside of the global North—and upheaval that began in the late-1960s (Inglehart and Norris 2017). Those writing in the western context generally argue:

[Reactions] to these developments triggered a counter-revolutionary 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. Sectors once culturally predominant [may react] angrily to the erosion of their privileges and status. (Inglehart and Norris 2016: 3)

Those writing in the context of the global South, on the other hand, tend to focus on the more clearly discursive and performative aspects of populism, which create new opportunities and expand perceptions of political possibility (Jansen 2017). However, regardless of context or which perspective one subscribes to, as Block aptly puts it, “[support] for these various populist

insurgencies [is] a signal to the leaders of the establishment that something is very wrong and that something must be done” (2018: 5).

While works in this vein offer some valuable insights, this analytical dichotomy is expectedly limiting, but nonetheless indicative of the highly fractured nature of the populism literature (Weyland 2001). On the one hand, those who emphasize the economic aspects of populism typically aim to identify the structural causes of these populist insurgencies, but sacrifice a great deal of analytical leverage by following following problematically vague definitions of populism as a “loose label that encompasses a diverse set of movements [that share] an antiestablishment orientation [and] a claim to speak for the people” (Rodrik 2018: 12). On the other hand, those who emphasize the cultural aspects of populism continue to expend a great deal of energy trying to define the concept by identifying the common ideological, organizational, or performative features that appear across cases (Mény and Surel 2002), leading some to describe populism as a “conceptual mirage” (Taguieff 1995). These works consequently spend far more time discussing various *populists* rather than *populism* and tend to downplay the politico-economic crises they nonetheless claim ignited the given populist trend. Altogether, conventional approaches generally aim either to identify the structural causes of populism *or* its conceptual parameters but fall short in understanding the mechanics of how exactly populism works as a contextually situated social process.

In this essay, I aim to develop the beginnings of an alternative framework for the study of electoral populism that draws on the neo-Gramscian theory of political articulation as a means of bridging the theoretical space between studies of global economic crises and conventional theories of populist mobilization. I argue that many of the noted limitations associated with these traditional approaches are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of politics as a mere ‘reflection’ of the social, whether framed in terms of socioeconomic crises, predefined social cleavages, or the passively changing preferences of voters (de Leon 2017). In contrast, the alternative framework proposed here emphasizes the political as *constitutive* of state and society, rather than a consequential derivative of the two. In this spirit, the alternative articulation framework that informs this essay emphasizes the relative agency of political parties and movements to articulate and disarticulate—that is naturalize and denaturalize—nationally hegemonic coalitional blocs (de Leon, Desai, and Tugal 2009, 2015). This position provides parties with a number of uniquely available means by which to articulate connections between various groups, interests, and policies. In this spirit, de Leon et al. specifically define political articulation as the “process through which [political] practices naturalize class, ethnic, and racial formations as a basis of social division by integrating disparate interests and identities into coherent sociopolitical blocs. Cleavages, therefore, are only the possible differences [among social actors]; they do not naturally carry any

political valence but may be deployed by parties to aggregate majorities” (2009: 195). Or, to simplify Gramsci’s own phrasing, it is political parties that interpret and translate the socioeconomic into the “political form” (2015: 22).

From a world-systems perspective, crises are an endemic feature of capitalism, and essential to the continued reproduction of the capitalist world-system. As Harvey so aptly puts it: “It is in the course of crises that the instabilities of capitalism are confronted, reshaped and re-engineered to create a new version of what capitalism is about” (2014:ix). Such crises of capitalism are never fully resolved however, but are simply moved around by temporary fixes that gloss over the critical contradiction(s) that fueled the particular crisis at hand (Silver 2003). Following Harvey again, these inevitable crises lead to...

dramatic changes in ways of thought and understanding, of institutions and dominant ideologies, of political allegiances and processes, of political subjectivities, of technologies and organizational forms, of social relations, of cultural customs and tastes that inform daily life. Crises shake our mental conceptions of the world and our place in it to the very core (2014:ix-x).

Such crises disrupt accepted views of the world, challenge widely held causal assumptions, and have the potential to upend peoples’ previously established understandings of their political interests.

While these systemic crises are an inevitable and defining feature of global capitalism, their social manifestation and consequences are by no means predefined. Some argue that the response to a particular a crisis is fundamentally a matter of resolving the pertinent contradictions of capitalism necessary to restore the conditions needed for capital accumulation and the realization of surplus value (Harvey 2014; 2010). Others emphasize the role of dominant causal ideas in shaping competing crisis narratives that political actors may attempt to mobilize in their favor (Hay 1996; 2004). In keeping with a common theme of this critique, I believe this too represents a problematic false dichotomy. Parties’ articulatory efforts are constrained by the broader sociopolitical context in which they operate, but nonetheless have the capacity to strategically and creatively adjust their respective projects to include competing attributions of blame for the same contradiction-fueled crises of capitalism.

This strategic blame-game is particularly evident in parties’ competing and ongoing responses to the 2008 financial crisis. In the UK, for example, the two major parties have steadily adopted projects anchored in a technocratic discourse of responsible governance. What exactly constitutes *responsible* governance, however, is a matter of political articulation. Since at least the 1990s,

Labour has articulated this notion of responsible governance in terms of strategic *depoliticization*, which Burnham aptly characterizes as a governing strategy that aims to “remove the political character of decision-making,” and a form of politics that “seeks to change market expectations regarding the effectiveness and credibility of policymaking in addition to shielding the government from the consequences of unpopular policies” (2001:127). Consequently, prior to the crisis, Gordon Brown’s Labour Government “preached the gospel of price stability, fiscal prudence and light touch regulation” (Hodson and Mabbett 2009: 1041). In response to the crisis, however, the Labour government undertook a series of unconventional monetary policies, promoted a major surge in public sector borrowing, and emphasized the need for international policy cooperation and bolstered supervision throughout the European Union (Pauly 2009; Begg 2009). When these initiatives proved unsuccessful, the Party pointed to the irresponsible behavior of other EU states or global financial sector rather than the Party’s economic policies (Elliott 2017; Hodson and Quaglia 2009). This all effectively led to a particular crisis narrative in which the 2008 recession is framed in terms of the others’ irresponsible policies, and therefore beyond the practical reach of the Labour government.

In contrast, the Conservative Party has consistently tried to frame their understanding of responsible governance by fusing the Party’s historical project of ‘one-nation Toryism’ with the principles of individualism and ‘personal responsibility’ typically associated with the Party under Margaret Thatcher (Clarke 2005; Hall 1988). One-nation Toryism, or one-nation conservatism, is frequently described as a political philosophy that emphasizes the solidaristic values and functions of a pragmatic and paternalist government (Seawright 2010), and promotes an effectively Schumpeterian view of democracy in which political elites serve to reconcile the competing interests of *all* classes and then supposedly act in accordance with the greater good of society as a whole (Lind 1996). While the term ‘one-nation Conservatism’ was originally coined by Disraeli to reference the responsibilities of the political classes to the working British masses (Disraeli 1980), it has since evolved to note the softening of Thatcher’s legacy within the Party and been used by many Conservatives to justify increased economic intervention by the state (BAGEHOT 2017).

The uneasy coexistence of these one-nation and free market principles has led the contemporary Conservative Party to a rather tenuous position and greatly hindered the Party’s ability to develop and adjust a resonant crisis narrative. On one hand, the one-nation rhetoric of elite responsibilities and good governance has been redirected toward the EU and mobilized to frame the crisis in blatantly partisan and Eurosceptic terms (Gifford 2014). On the other hand, the free market principles instilled under Thatcher continue to influence the Party’s wide-ranging cuts to government spending and pursuit of austerity policies (MacLeavy 2011; O’Hara 2015). The

interplay between these contradictory discourses has ultimately produced a crisis narrative in which the EU is the primary culprit responsible for the crisis itself, while the Party's various market-oriented policy prescriptions are framed in terms of a one-nation Toryism that is relatively ambivalent toward the EU as a whole (Vail 2015).

The most recent wave of 'populist' mobilizations in the UK begin to take shape in a different light when these competing partisan projects are considered together and situated within the overarching context of global neoliberalism. While both major parties have consistently expressed a certain degree of discontent with the EU, neither party has successfully made any significant changes to address the various problems they continue to associate with the EU (Owen and Walter 2017). The UK Independence Party (UKIP) effectively emerged to fill the void left by the mutually narrow articulations of the Labour and Conservative Parties (Farrell and Newman 2017). With the two major parties divided on the EU, and the already anemic Liberal Democrats wrapped up in a struggling coalition government helmed by the Conservatives, UKIP and their leader Nigel Farage successfully amplified the established Eurosceptic discourse while also expanding their project to include a pointed critique of the political establishment's failure and/or unwillingness to prioritize the fundamental interests of the British 'people' (Evans and Mellon 2016; Ford, Goodwin, and Cutts 2012). Though the Party has had little electoral success, it nonetheless brought the 'Europe question' to the center of British politics, exposed the ambivalence and supposedly misplaced priorities of the political establishment, and pressured the government to hold the referendum that triggered the UK's departure from the EU (Clarke and Newman 2017; Farrell and Newman 2017; Glencross 2016).

Similar dynamics are evident across the Atlantic in the United States, where the Democratic Party has historically promoted similar principles of depoliticized technocratic governance, and advanced a program of technocratic managerialism that emphasizes the role of purportedly unbiased and dispassionate policy experts uniquely equipped to advance national economic interests within increasingly global constraints (Romano 2007). This resulted in a particular crisis narrative that framed the 2008 crisis as a consequence of Republican-led deregulations that limited the capacity for those unbiased technocrats to intervene ahead of what proved to be a global financial disaster (Zuesse 2013).

On the other hand, Republicans have consistently emphasized the primacy of free markets and an expanded positive view of 'American exceptionalism', in which the United States is seen as uniquely committed to the democratic ideals of personal liberty and economic freedom (Tyrrell 2016). Together, these seemingly contradictory principles produce a broader discourse of economic nationalism centered on a "desire to shape market outcomes to privilege the position of certain actors" (Clift and Woll 2012: 308). This came together to produce a crisis narrative in

which a particular cadre of ‘responsible’ Americans fell victim to the ‘irresponsible’ decisions of another group who abused misplaced government incentives to buy houses they could not afford (Andrews 2008; Love and Mattern 2011). In this case, blame falls squarely with Democrats and many of their traditional constituencies, which the Republicans collectively articulate as antithetical to U.S. economic interests.

When considering these competing projects together, it is clear that both parties sought to reestablish the market-based conditions of capital accumulation while also competing for voters’ support by articulating separate crisis narratives that fit within their previously established partisan projects. Democrats emphasized the absence of technocratic oversight, while Republicans pointed to the un-American policies and interventions of their Democratic opponents. The GOP’s strategic articulation of fundamental market principles in overtly nationalistic terms opened the door for Donald Trump’s “populist” insurgency, which similarly emphasized the incompetence of political insiders and anybody that fell beyond the narrowed conception ‘responsible’ Americans already articulated by the Republican Party.

While this is by no means a complete analysis, and the ideas proposed here are far from fully developed, I believe that the articulation framework provides what is likely a very fruitful starting point for future studies of electoral populism. By centering this discussion on the role of political parties, future studies are likely to find that many of the apparent contradictions associated with the growing number of populist mobilizations are themselves a product of the contingent, historical trajectories of partisan development. The two cases considered here also demonstrate the articulation framework’s unique consideration for the mutual significance and dialectical interplay between institutional structures and creative political action. While crises are an endemic feature of global capitalism, their manifestation is contingent upon the various institutional structures and legacies in which they are translated. Future studies would benefit from applying this framework to other, often more complicated institutional contexts, particularly the cases of Greece, Italy, and Turkey in which the political upheavals of the Great Recession remain far from settled. More generally, this framework provides a means by which to analyze the many national varieties of populism without losing sight of the overarching common strains of life under global capitalism. It also offers a concrete analytical framework that may be applied within the broader perspective of world-systems analysis to address questions of systemic convergence and variegation, while also holding strong to our collected intellectual commitment to progressive social transformation that challenges the exploitative system of global capitalism.

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