Holistic Myth and Populist Reality: Populism, Nativism and Biopolitics in Times of Pandemics

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Abstract

The article follows a structuralist approach to ideological constructions, identifying the myth of the whole and united people's body as the most significant for populism. Populism is defined here as a political strategy, including some elements of a thin-centered ideology and of a discursive style. For right-wing populism, a combination of populist strategy with nativism is the main feature. The representation of the people as a single body is central because it creates the very *raison d'être* for populism, since the latter claims to represent some "general will" (*volonté générale*). Nativism and other features of (right-wing) populist ideologemes emerge logically from this discursive holism, because a single body should be inevitably kept united and "clean". The COVID-19 pandemic gave rise to both nativism and populist biopolitics, because a "bounded community" should be healthy, and any kind of regulating human biological life resonates well with populist representations. Thus, the pandemic not only won't decrease populist influence, but will definitely increase it.

Keywords: populism, nativism, holistic myth, structuralism, biopolitics, COVID-19 pandemic.

Introduction

Populism is now one of the most "popular" and wide-spread concepts in political science. Many researchers argue it has become an over-inclusive label used both by journalists and scientists, speak of "populist hype" (De Cleen, Glynos and Mondon, 2018: 657) and propose "minimal definitions" of populism purified of any additional shades. However, it is exactly when we employ these minimal definitions that populism becomes an over-inclusive concept; e.g., the label of "democratic illiberalism" (Pappas, 2019: 33) may be attached to a wide variety of political regimes that are not necessarily populist by nature. It is quite obvious that populism is a still relevant concept in political science because it combines elements that create a certain structure, a system non-equal to just the sum of its elements' features. However, we should bear in mind that populism is not a full-fledged ideology but rather a "thin-centered ideology" (Freeden, 2001: 203) that, to function independently, needs coexistence with "bigger" ideological structures such as socialism or nationalism. In such combinations, populism gets an adjective "right-wing" or "left-wing". In the case of right-wing populism, we speak of populism *per se* (populism as a political strategy of gaining votes, "thin populism") combined with nationalism/nativism. The above-mentioned "populism *per se*" means, first of all, anti-elitism, anti-pluralism and self-identification with the "will of the people". Hence, right-wing populism may be defined here, for the purposes of this article, as a political strategy combining nationalism (nativism), anti-elitism, anti-pluralism (= holism) and self-identifying with the will of the people; a strategy that is aimed at acquiring electoral success. In such a definition, we combine the most wide-spread ideational, discursive and strategic approaches to populism (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013).

Any ideology, including right-wing populism, is based on a certain number of political myths. Political mythology is the *conditio sine qua non* for any ideological construction because it addresses the audience's minds in a direct way, without any hard-understandable theories. In the case of populism, its founding myth is that of homogeneity: the people as a homogenous body that has a general will and a common interest. We further argue in this piece that this founding myth, the holistic myth, as we'll further call it, produces additional tropes widely employed in the right-wing populist discourse, namely nationalism (in the form of nativism), a preference for direct democracy (as a mean to express the "general will"), biopolitical rigorism and frequently demonstrated "masculinity". In the times of a global medical crisis, it is especially important to look at the populist holism to understand how right- and left-wing populist actors may behave in the changing circumstances.

The holistic myth as a pre-condition for populism

Since populism does not have an ideological ground of its own, it has to exploit political mythology (Stoica, 2017: 70). Raoul Girardet (1986: 13) defined a political myth as a "fabulation, deformation or (…) interpretation of the reality", a "legendary narrative" having an explanatory meaning and a mobilizing potential, helping to understand the reality, to "turn a chaos of facts and events into a logical picture". A more precise and academic definition of a political myth is to be found in the seminal work by Christopher Flood (2002: 42): "an ideologically marked account of the past, present, or predicted political events". Or, in the same vein, we may define a myth as a "belief held in common by a large group of people that gives events and actions a particular meaning" (Edelman, 1971: 14). Girardet wrote about four major political myths: a myth of conspiracy, of a golden age, of a savior, and of a unity. All of them are found in the populist discourse: an elite conspiracy, a return to a "golden age" (palingenesis), a savior – or a populist (charismatic, in terms of Max Weber) leader, and, finally, a political unity, that is, discursive holism. Populism, indeed, "is generally based on simple and accessible narrative figures that are emotionally overloaded" (Ungureanu and Popartan, 2020: 41).

It is this holism that is the most instrumental for populism. Literally, populism "wants to make the entire people into one large party" (Urbinati, 2014: 143). Since right-wing populism is based on a two-fold dichotomy, i.e., "people vs. elites" and "we vs. they", populist ideologists have to assume that it is the entire people, a "one-body-people" that is opposed to the (poorly defined) elite, and that "we" and "they" are two homogenous and unbreakable bodies. If a people, or *demos*, is not homogeneous, it cannot have a "general will". Thus, the *raison d'être* of populism does not exist, because it has nothing to express. In having previously mentioned Max Weber, it is important to recall his understanding of political legitimacy. He famously distinguished between charismatic, traditional and legal authority (Weber, 1958); for populist actors, the charismatic type is the most significant. For a charismatic populist leader, myths, and especially a holistic myth, is a primary source of legitimacy, because this representation of a nation as a whole gives this leader a certain (though often presumed) right to operate this or that way. In populist discourse, "people" refers simultaneously to three understandings: common people (as plebs), sovereign people

(as demos), and bounded people (as a community) (Mény and Surel, 2000: 185-214). All three meanings presume a bounded collectivity, so we may assume that the latter meaning, people-as-community, absorbs both people-as-demos and people-as-plebs, and is the most important.

The right-wing populist understanding of homogeneity means an exclusion of those groups that break this illusory homogeneity, from the people (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007: 323). Consequently, if right-wing populists have to (discursively) exclude some groups or individuals from the people's body, they are to include nationalism in their ideological core.

Nativist nationalism: *ein Volk, ein Reich*, …?

Nationalism may be understood as an ideological mobilization of ethnic or national identity with political or cultural intensions. Cas Mudde (2010: 1173-1175) points at nationalism (nativism, in his words) as one of the three core components of right-wing populist ideology, together with strategic populism (populism *per se*) and authoritarianism. Jens Rydgren (2017: 495) even argues that it is not the populist aspect that is the most important feature of right-wing populist activities, but its nationalist dimension.

A wide-spread classification of nationalisms into civic and ethnic types (Kohn, 1965; Greenfeld, 1994; Hobsbawm, 1992) is in fact a description of different stages in the development of the same phenomenon; moreover, as Anthony Smith (1998: 126) correctly noted, "even the most 'civic' and 'political' nationalisms often turn out on closer inspection to be also 'ethnic' and 'linguistic'". However, some other types of nationalism may be identified; nativism is one of them. In being an "opposition to an internal minority on the ground of its foreign (…) connections" (Higham, 2011: 4), it still has a subject for negativism and a subject for the utmost allegiance that are typical for nationalism of any kind. However, these are not "another ethnic group/nation" and "own ethnic group/nation", respectively, but the widely understood "We" and the widely understood "Others". "We" and "natives" are more inclusive categories than those employed by ethnic/civic nationalists. "Natives" may include everyone recognized and accepted as such. For instance, a German nativist may consider not only German people to be "native", but also Turkish immigrants who had settled in Germany a decade ago and accepted the German language and culture. It is exactly the kind of nationalism employed by most right-wing populist parties in Western Europe (combined with civilizational subtype): Marine Le Pen or Geert Wilders almost never speak about ethnic origin but about the acceptance of, respectively, French or Dutch (or, more broadly, European or Western) values (Pappas, 2018). Anti-immigrant sentiments are usually explained not through non-native ethnic origin, but through the unwillingness or inability of the newcomers to adapt to a host society.

However, nationalist style differs in various parts of Europe. If the above is true for Western Europe, in Central and Eastern Europe nativism is usually combined with some elements of "classical" ethnic nationalism (if we still accept the dichotomy of Hans Kohn and his successors). This is partly explained through the absence there of anti-nationalist consensus

that had been formed in the West after the Second World War. For most West European parties, manifesting overt nationalism means becoming marginalized and ostracized; this is not the case in CEE where ethnic nationalism became one of the core nation-building ideologemes in times of post-Communist transition. Moreover, if West European right-wing populists usually try to distance themselves from interwar nationalist movements and collaborationist structures, some East European populists even stress their continuity from such actors. For instance, "People's Party – Our Slovakia" is proud to be the (discursive) heir of Jozef Tiso's collaborationist government; "For Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK" party in Latvia was often criticized for praising SS Latvian Legion (Zuroff, 2009).

In spite of these ethno-nationalist elements, populists in all parts of the European Union try to distance themselves from political radicalism of any kind. Political radicalism is, first and foremost, a political style (so, it has a common ground with populist electoral strategies) that implies non-conventional forms of political participation and is often prone to marginalization. It is important to distinguish it from political extremism: political radicals do attempt to subvert the existing rules, but, as a norm, they do not break the law and do not exclude themselves from a state's legal order. Radicalism is to some extent opposed to populism, because while the former aims at changing the entire political system, the latter always remains, at least formally, in the framework of (il)liberal democracy and existing institutions. That is why some right-wing populist parties even exploit the presence of more radical actors to their advantage: e.g., the Hungarian Fidesz party pretends to be more moderate and inclusive than Jobbik; the Belgian New Flemish Alliance is constantly being compared to the more radical Flemish Interest. In Poland, the ruling Law and Justice party has not spared efforts not to get associated with the Independence March, an event organized annually (since 2010) by extreme right groupings.

Another way to formally avoid associations with radical ethno-nationalists is including members of immigrant or just non-native communities into party governing bodies. This has long been practiced by Marine Le Pen, Pim Fortuyn, Gerolf Annemans and other right-wing leaders in Western Europe; in CEE, such measures are employed by the Latvian National Alliance and Estonian Conservative People's Party that have appointed Russians and Azerbaijanis to high-ranking positions.

So, it is clear that nativist and ethnic kinds of nationalism are clearly present in the right-wing populist discourse (nativism always, ethnonationalism sporadically). Still, it is important to mention civic nationalism (or rather, civic form/stage of nationalist development). It is most clearly manifested in the form of Euroscepticism. As Paul Taggart (2017: 257) wrote, "it is hard to think of a contemporary West European populist party that does not exhibit a degree of Euroscepticism"; the same is true for most East European parties, with the notable exception of the Latvian National Alliance. It sees the EU as a counterweight to the presumed "Russian threat" (Nacionālā Apvienība, 2012). Euroscepticism means first and foremost a protectionist mode to the advantage of a particular nation-state; "Brussels" is seen as a threat to national independence and national dignity. Thus, operating at the state level, and not at

the level of groups or individuals, it is a clear manifestation of a civic, and not nativist or ethnic, form of nationalism.

Populist biopolitics and the COVID-19 pandemic

If populists of different kinds assert that people count as some homogeneous body, it would be quite logical if they will also underline the importance of keeping this body healthy and clean. This is how populists make their way into the realm of biopolitics. The latter may be interpreted as political measures and the accompanying discourse aimed at the regulation of healthcare, fertility and sexuality. To quote Michel Foucault (1998: 138), one of the pioneers in researching the concept, biopolitics' aim is "to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order". While using the so-called *biopower*, the state exercises its impact on all aspects of human life, including the biological ways of existence (Foucault, 2007: 1), that are commonly perceived as private and free from state intervention. Conventionally, the biologization of race and culture, as well as queer and gender rhetoric, also count as biopolitical issues. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most right-wing populist biopolitical points were focused on the issues of LGBTQ+ treatment, abortion and euthanasia; however, the approaches to it differ in various European sub-regions. If the West European populist parties developed a moderate or libertarian approach to these issues, their East European counterparts usually demonstrate a more conservative and rigorous rhetoric.

The pandemic brought some new challenges and possibilities for populists. The issue of public health became central in every corner of our planet; all political parties tried to use this situation for their advantage, and some have succeeded. For populism, COVID-19 has definitely become a source of further ideological work, because the very logic of populist strategies stresses a necessity to exploit "hot" issues that are in the spotlight of public discussions. Capitalizing on all kinds of crises, be they economic or political, is typical of populist discourse; a medical crisis is no exception.

Populist parties tried to draw tactical assets from the situation, because they have long called for limiting migration, tougher border control and concentration of powers in the nation-state; now it all happened. Biopolitics is now situated in such spheres as freedom of travel, an attitude towards human life and body, social distancing and protective measures; even subconsciously, all this is associated with populist single-body ideologeme. As Giorgio Agamben (1998: 11) wrote, "[b]ehind the long, strife-ridden process that leads to the recognition of rights and formal liberties stands once again the body of the sacred man with his double sovereign, his life that cannot be sacrificed yet may, nevertheless, be killed". This "body of the sacred man" turns in populist rhetoric into a "body of the sacred nation". Another political philosopher, Achille Mbembe (2019), proposed a concept of "necropolitics", that even to a greater extent fits the current pandemic influence on the political field. Necropolitics, according to Mbembe, is a set of methods of economic and political management by means of creating a permanent death threat. To a certain extent, it is a more radical kind of biopolitics: biopolitics is producing some positive endpoints (to

behave in a certain way to reach a better life), while necropolitics operates with avoiding a negative endpoint (to avoid a worse life or not to lose it at all).

The reaction to the pandemic differs depending on the position of a right-wing populist party in a polity. If a party is in power, it uses COVID-19 to formally extend its influence, as it was the case with the Hungarian Fidesz: its leader, Viktor Orbán, introduced a state of emergency in Hungary and acquired the right to rule by decree. If a party is in opposition, it toughens its critique of the government: whether for late and insufficient reaction, or for unnecessary restrictions; and these kinds of critique may change in one and the same party's discourse in a week or two. For instance, Matteo Salvini, the leader of the Italian Lega, has intensified his critique of Giuseppe Conte's government for its inability to handle the spread of the virus. Mainstream parties even speak of "coronationalism" on behalf of right-wing politicians: Jean Jambon (New Flemish Alliance), the leader of the Flemish region in Belgium, claimed southern regions get more money from the EU than deserved (Brzozowski, 2020). Another Belgian populist leader, Filip Dewinter (Flemish Interest), criticized the use of the Arab language in explanatory posters about COVID-19, and called the immigrants "corona-spitters", thus demonstrating that, in the party's opinion, healthy nation's body cannot include "foreigners" (De Cleen and Goyvaerts, 2020: 16).

A divide is seen even between opposition populist parties depending on their prospects for a coalition: the Dutch Party for Freedom criticized the "intelligent lockdown" (a rather mild measures) saying that "[prime minister] Rutte prefers to play with the lives of people rather than saving them", while the Forum for Democracy, another Dutch right-wing actor, supported the government's approach. Scholars explain it through the potential the latter has to build a coalition with the ruling party, hence the avoidance of harsh critique (Akkerman, 2020).

Some theorists argued that coronavirus would "kill" or "disactivate" populism, because in a situation of a pandemic, the voters would opt for competence and expertise, rather than for emotional appeals (Halikiopoulou, 2020); protest voting, as populist support is sometimes seen, is a kind of luxury that most voters cannot afford in critical circumstances (Langenbacher, 2020). However, such prognoses are rather short-termed, and are in fact just a reflection of the moment. It is highly likely that, after the crisis, populist parties will find a way to regain popular support, at least by ascribing governments' merits to themselves. The pandemic will obviously damage the world economy; many households lose work and income and automatically become prone to populist emotions and simplistic decisions. Moreover, the above-mentioned expertise itself is in crisis, because the excessive flow of expert data and the crowds of self-proclaimed quasi-experts lead to depreciation and politicization of expert knowledge (Brubaker, 2020).

To add a point, the COVID-19 crisis has fueled reasoning not only for populist protectionist and anti-establishment rhetoric, but also for populist nativism. Indeed, "before the enemy was the migrant. Now the enemy is the migrant carrying the coronavirus" (Smith, 2020). The "Chinese virus" mantra and other forms of stigmatization led to an increase in anti-immigrant

and anti-foreign sentiments with the electorate. Right-wing populist speakers in Belgium, Sweden, the US and other countries blamed the immigrants for their inability and unwillingness to follow the prescribed measures and sometimes even for the intention to infect the natives. E.g., in London, a Singaporean student was attacked, and the attackers screamed, "I don't want your coronavirus in my country" (Guy, 2020).

Conclusion

As is evident from what we have previously said, populist (both right- and left-wing) discourse is built around a holistic myth, a myth of a nation as a bounded community and a single body having its own will and interest. In right-wing populist ideologemes, not only "corrupt" elites are excluded from and juxtaposed to this people's body (a vertical dichotomy), but also foreigners, immigrants and all kinds of "non-natives" (a horizontal dichotomy). Thus, anti-elitism gets combined with nativism, i.e., a kind of nationalism that operates with the category of (non-)nativeness instead of ethnic or civic terms. However, elements of ethnically and civically shaded rhetoric are still present in the discourse of right-wing populist parties in different parts of Europe.

The corona-crisis definitely sheds some more light on these grounding myths of populist logic. Since a people's body is endangered, more incentives to appeal to biopolitical (in the understanding of Foucault and Agamben) and nativist concerns arise. In this vein, populism cannot be put aside by a medical threat and call for expertise, but on the contrary, it would thrive on fears and deep-rooted concerns of the voters; and a holistic myth is even more strengthened by an external enemy, be it the virus itself or a non-native group spreading this virus.

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