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**Myths, Fallacies, and Realities of Populism:
Towards a New Typology**

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Myths, Fallacies, and Realities of Populism: Towards a New Typology

José Filipe Pinto

Abstract

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, when Herzen created the word in Tsarist Russia, populism remains as a sort of Cinderella's shoe or Teumessian fox never destined to be caught. In fact, almost all scholars refuse and criticize the existing definitions as strategy for presenting their own meaning of the concept. Thus far, the conceptual ambiguity leads to myths and fallacies about populism. This paper aims at revisiting some of the myths that have already been debunked, namely by Takis Pappas. Moreover, it presents new myths and fallacies at a time when, in an increasing number of countries, populism is no longer content with Canovan's image of being the shadow of democracy. Finally, the paper proves that the phenomenon should be regarded through new lenses because the dividing line between the left and the right side of the political spectrum is not enough to grasp the sense of populism, and a new typology of populism is required. This typology, based on several meanings of the people and the elite, comprises seven modalities of populism: anti-system or anti-establishment, bottom-top, top-bottom or plutopopulism, socioeconomic, cultural or identitarian, digital or 2.0., and transnational or civilizational.

Keywords: *populism, myths, fallacies, typology*

Introduction

The meaning of the word populism is far from consensual, as populism is an ill-defined term or “an all-embracing term that brings together very different political entities” (Scott, 2017, p. 20). Tushnet (2019, p. 382) indicates two widespread approaches to identifying contemporary populism: “the stipulative approach—common in journalistic accounts—attaches the label to regimes with charismatic leaders who claim to speak for ‘the people’ and offer a rhetoric of opposition to ‘elites’ of one or another sort”, and the “definitional approach—taken by academics—offers general criteria by which populist regimes can be identified”, but both of them “treat populism as a mode of political activity, without specific substantive content” that must be “provided by something else”, i.e. by the ideologies.

Thus, “there are nearly as many formulas for defining the concept of populism as there are books, papers, and treatises on the topic” (Postel, 2019, p. 2), and it can be regarded as “an ideology (Laclau 1977; Mudde 2004), style of politics (Knight 1998), specific discourse (Hawkins 2009) or the political strategy (Weyland 2001)” (Pappas, 2013, pp. 2-3), as well as a way of articulating the discourse aiming at the fight for hegemony, mainly in the political dimension (Pinto, 2017a). This lack of a common definition led Isaiah Berlin (1967, p. 6) to speak about “a Cinderella complex”, as “there exists a shoe – the word ‘populism’ – for which somewhere there must exist a foot. There are all kinds of feet which it nearly fits, but we must not be trapped by these nearly-fitting feet”. Thus, there are almost as many definitions as the number of scholars whose research is centered on the issue. This reality explains that each scholar, before presenting his or her own definition, prefers to identify and debunk some myths concerning the concept.

In the light of the foregoing, each typology of populism suffers the same difficulty. This is the reason explaining that Taggart (2003, p. 4) considers Canovan’s seminal proposal as “the most ambitious attempts to get to grips with populism”, as she drew back “from seeing populism as unified” and rather offered “a key differentiation between agrarian populism and political populism” while Laclau (2005, p. 5), despite also recognizing that “Canovan is perfectly aware of the true dimensions of the diversity, which are revealed, to start with, in the plurality of definitions of populism to be found in the literature”, refused that typology, considering that it “lacks any coherent criterion around which its distinctions are established”, asking, for example, “in what sense are agrarian populisms not political?” (p. 6). It should also be pointed out that “Laclau was very critical not only relatively to Canovan but also to Donald MacRae (1969) and Peter Wiles (1969) for example” (Pinto, 2017b, p.75), proving that is easier to criticize than to present an own typology, despite some scholars, namely Takis Pappas, have accepted the double sense of the challenge. Thus, Pappas (2013, p. 29), after debunking three myths on populism, distinguishes “between three distinct types of European populism: primarily political, ethnic nationalist and regional separatist” explaining that the difference is that “in primarily political populism the antithesis is between

the ‘pure’ people (*il popolo*) and the current ‘corrupt’ political class (the political establishment)”. This is the normal idea on populism and many populist leaders use it in most of their discourses.

Concerning the second type, ethnic nationalist populism, “a national community with reputedly common cultural attributes (an *éthnos* or *kulturnation*) is pitted against menacing foreign forces (immigrants, the EU)”. This modality focuses on the cultural elements and the fear of losing national identity due to foreign interferences. This is the reason explaining that some typologies refer to exclusionary populism.

Finally, regional separatist populism, “echoes Europe’s ancient centre-periphery cleavage as it sets secessionist regions (e.g., Catalonia, Padania, Scotland) against their respective national centres”. According to this modality, the populist party considers that there is a nation subjugated by a foreign power, even when the party is obliged to invent the nation, as it happened with Padania whose history was created by the Northern League, and fights for its independence.

As it was already said, the mentioned typologies are far from consensual. For instance, Kyle & Gultchin (2018, p. 13) also admitted a three-branches typology, but with different types of populism: cultural, socio-economic, and anti-establishment, “distinguished by how political elites use populist discourse to sow divisions”, despite recognizing that “some populists combine elements of all three forms of populism, weaving together cultural crises with economic ones and using both to justify purging the establishment”.

The list of typologies is endless, but it is noteworthy to present the typology proposed by Malreddy, Purakayastha & Heidemann (2020, p. 5) because that long list identifies ten types of populism and presents examples for each modality. The typology is the following: right-wing populism - Donald Trump; Boris Johnson; Narendra Modi; left-wing populism - Alexis Tsipras; Hugo Chávez; Rafael Correa; Shining Path (Preu), FARC (Colombia); democratic populism. Populism as style & performance - Sectarian, ethnic or religious political parties (e.g. Shiv Sena Party; Iran Novin Party); dynastic populism - dynasties of Gandhi, Bhutto, Su Kyi, Trudeau, Bush, Sukarno, Rajapaksa; totalitarian mass dictatorship - Fascist Italy; Nazi Germany; Bolshevik Russia; Communist China; authoritarian mass dictatorship - Idi Amin; Rafael Trujillo; Sani Abacha; Omar Al Bashir; Robert Mugabe; electoral authoritarianism/benevolent dictatorship - Lee Kwan-Yew; Mahathir Mohammad; Park Chung-Hee; post-truth populism - Donald Trump; Rodrigo Duterte; Jair Bolsonaro; autocratic populism - Viktor Orbán; Jarosław Kaczyński, and soft populism - Emmanuel Macron. Probably, the list is far from consensual and not only to its size. Indeed, if dynastic populism, seen as “an electoral cult built around inherited power through fraternal, filial and affective bonds of the nation-builders” can still be found in some regions of the world, it seems more difficult to accept the existence of benevolent dictatorship. Moreover, the so-called soft populism and the reference to Emmanuele Macron can lead to the wrong conclusion that all the politicians who denounce the political system as unfair are populist.

This paper refers and analyses some populist myths and presents a new typology of the concept based on five criteria: the relationship of populist parties with the system; the social position of the populist leader; the way populist parties define the people and the elite inside the borders of their countries; the use of the web as the main or the sole platform for the populist message, and the importance of the borders as limit of the concept of people.

Myths and Fallacies

For a long period, many Portuguese scholars refused to accept the existence of populism in Portugal because they did not consider the left-wing type. For example, Zuquete (2019) affirmed that “for me, till the moment, it has not yet appeared a populist party in Portugal”. Moreover, he added that this situation was due to the importance of “a Communist Party still fairly strong”¹. Silva & Salgado (2020) also wrote a chapter whose title was «Why no Populism in Portugal? » in which they defended that “talk of populism is all around us. Yet, so far Portugal is one of the few Western countries that seem to have escaped this global pattern” (p. 251), proving “the failure of populism (populist rhetoric and populist strategies) in Portugal” (p. 259) between 2011 and 2015.

However, Silva & Salgado (2020) did not clearly deny the existence of left-wing populist parties in Portugal in that period, as they mentioned that “notwithstanding the record-high levels of unemployment and deep popular discontent with the Troika-imposed austerity measures, the Communist vote remained virtually unchanged – from 441,000 in 2011 to 445,000 in 2015 – and overall left-wing protest parties secured only 12 more seats in Parliament”, i.e. “populism seemingly paid less electoral dividends in Portugal than in other comparable countries (p. 260).

The previous paragraph points to the myth considering populism as an extreme right-wing phenomenon despite Takis Pappas having already debunked it some years ago, as well as the myth considering populism a thin-centred ideology, a concept defined by Freedman (1998) as “one that arbitrarily severs itself from wider ideational contexts, by the deliberate removal and replacement of concepts”, and due to the arbitrary, “the consequence is a structural inability to offer complex ranges of argument, because many chains of ideas one would normally expect to find stretching from the general and abstract to the concrete and practical, from the core to the periphery, as well as in the reverse direction, are simply absent”. This means that a thin ideology has “an identifiable morphology, but, unlike mainstream ones, a restricted one”. However, Gidron & Bonikowski (2004, p.6) defend that if populism is defined “as a thin-centered ideology, it can be found across ideological cleavages, fused with either left- or right-wing appeals”, and Noury & Roland, 2020, p. 424) state that populism can “ally with all sorts of ideologies”,

For me, populism is not an ideology despite using ideological elements

¹Available at: https://www.ulisboa.pt/sites/ulisboa.pt/files/public/europeias_ate_ao_momento_ao_surgiu_um_partido_populista_em_portugal.pdf.

taking into account the conjuncture. For example, in Greece, “a coalition government between a party of the radical left (Συνασπισμός Ριζοσπαστικής Αριστεράς - Coalition of the Radical Left/SYRIZA) and a party of the nationalist right (Ανεξάρτητοι Έλληνες - Independent Greeks/ANEL) would have been unthinkable before the economic crisis upended the old party system” because SYRIZA and ANEL defend different ideological ideas. However, the conjuncture allowed that alliance because they “shared rejection of the bailout agreements”, and both of them criticized the “high level corruption and of vested interests connected to the two former major parties” (Tsatsanis, Andreadis & Teperoglou, 2018, p. 435)

Pappas also identified and tried to debunk a third myth concerning the existence of a close relationship between populism and charismatic leadership. However, this is not a complete fallacy because many populist parties have media notoriety mainly due to their leaders, as it happens with Orban’s Fidesz, Marine Le Pen’s National Rally, Geert Wilders’ Freedom Party, Salvini’s League and so on. Moreover, there are several cases of former populist leaders who continue being the principal face of the party after leaving the leadership, as it happens with Beppe Grillo, the co-founder of the Movement 5 Stelle, or even after his death, as it was Hugo Chavez’s case.

In my opinion, the rise of populism requires both objective and subjective conditions and the existence of a charismatic leader is one of the main subjective causes while objective conditions point to conjunctural and structural elements, namely the economic crisis, the arrival of heavy waves of immigrants and refugees, and the emergence of centrifugal or separatist forces. However, we should note that the direct relationship between the economic crisis and the rise of populism is a rule accepting a lot of exceptions because there are several countries where the crisis did not leave deep social traces, but in which populism is increasing, namely in Germany where the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) counts on 9 seats in the European Parliament, despite its critical Euroscepticism, and 81 members in the German Parliament, being the first party since Nazi era to be monitored in Germany. The party can present itself as an alternative, but the financial scandals involving several of its main members, namely Alice Weidel, Jörg Meuthen, and Frauke Petry, point otherwise.

Moreover, there are some neighbor countries with similar situations, but with a completely different behavior concerning the role played by populist parties. Moreover, we should also count on time as a variable. For example, during a long period, “radical right-wing populist parties have been highly successful in Denmark but have largely failed in Sweden” (Rydgren, 2010, p. 57). However, according to the most recent Timbro’s authoritarian populism index 2019, whose title is quite illustrative: «Populism is on the rise», “in Sweden, the Sweden Democrats had its best election ever and went from 12.9 percent to 17.5 percent”. Moreover, “SD has increased its support in every election since the formation of the party through eight consecutive elections”. And “there is no other party in Europe, regardless of political affiliation, that has had the same kind of success”. Meanwhile, in Denmark, the Danish People’s Party (DF) “has seen very stable opinion polls through four years of

supporting the centre-right government”².

To sum up, probably the most dangerous myth concerning populism is that one defending that representative democracy failed and illiberal democracy must replace it. Indeed, the role played by the incumbent populist parties, regardless the modality of populism, proves that populism is rather the problem than the solution, or, according to Mounk & Kyle (2018) research, “populist governments have deepened corruption, eroded individual rights, and inflicted serious damage on democratic institutions”. Some years ago, Pinto (2017b, p. 106) identified three scholar positions towards the relationship between populism and democracy: populism as a threat for democracy; populism seen as a useful mean for reinvigorating and improving the democratic system, and populism conceived as neither good nor bad.

Blog team (2017)³ collected five views about the issue and came to a very similar conclusion. In fact, according to Zsolt Enyedi, “populism is indeed a threat to democracy – and the positive case for it is rather feeble”, while Ruth Wodak considers that only “right-wing populist parties pose clear short and long-term dangers”, and Chantal Mouffe defends that “the only way to save democracy is to promote a ‘progressive populism’”, i.e. a left-wing populism. Wodak and Mouffe’s statements point at a four position among scholars, defending that there is a good populism opposing a bad one.

Moreover, John Fitzgibbon affirms that “populists are not anti-democratic, they are anti-liberal democracy”, and Yannis Stavrakakis advices that “anti-populism may be the real threat to democracy”. For me, the political behavior of populist parties, both belonging to the right-wing and left-wing, since their arrival to power prove that the first position must be taken seriously. Malreddy, Purakayastha & Heidemann (2020, p. 3) quote Molloy (2018) and defend that “once in power, the populist leaders embark on a ‘permanent campaign’ to prove to their voters and loyalists that they do not ally with the establishment”. The problem is that their campaign leads to the formation of a new top-bottom model. This is the reason why Larry Diamond (2017) argues that populism “can, at a minimum, threaten liberal democracies—those that uphold the highest democratic standards for protecting civil liberties—when populists reject the notion of pluralism and embrace cultural exclusion” and “Jan-Werner Müller argues that populism’s illiberal elements are in fact threats to democracy” (Liddiard, 2019, p. 2).

Towards a New Typology

After mentioning some of the most well-known typologies, it is the moment for presenting my proposal based on five criteria: the relationship of populist parties with the system; the social position of the populist leader; the way populist parties define the people and the elite inside the borders of their countries; the use of the web as the main or the sole platform for the populist

²Available at <https://populismindex.com/report/>.

³Available at g/2017/07/24/is-populism-really-a-threat-to-democracy/.

message, and the importance of the borders as limit of the concept of people.

According to the first criterium, I consider two types of populism: anti-system or anti-establishment and systemic, the latter one consisting of two levels due to the position of the populist party as incumbent or in opposition. Kyle & Gultchin (2018, p. 15) state that “all forms of populism tend to be anti-establishment”. However, the anti-establishment populist parties have its own features because “the conflict is primarily with establishment elites rather than with any specific ethnic or social group”, i.e., “for anti-establishment populists, the pure people are the honest, hard-working citizens who are preyed on by an elite-run state that serves special interests, and these elites are the primary enemy of the people”. This concept of elite helps to understand that “this variant of populism has often been wedded to an economic affiliation with market liberalism”, explaining its main flags against the omnipresence and the consequent interference of the state in almost all the sectors of the political, social, and, above all, economic life.

The anti-system populist parties, in the first moment, place them at the margins of the system, even contesting elections, they victimize themselves accusing the system to prepare the electoral rules benefiting the mainstream parties. However, when they reach the power, alone or in coalition, they continue to denounce the old system as a strategy to implement a new model according to their interests, as it happens, for example, in Hungary where Orban is replacing the representative democracy for the so-called illiberal democracy, centering the whole power in his hands. not respecting the traditional separation of powers, namely the independence of the courts, and controlling all the principal mass media through the establishment of the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA) gathering the ownership rights of more than 470 different Hungarian media outlets.

In what concerns the second criterium, one can identify two modalities because populism is not always a bottom-top movement. Indeed, there are several cases in which a part of the no-governmental elite, namely the economic one, decides that it is the moment to reach the power and assume the condition of governmental. It is the so-called plutopopulism, and Donald Trump can be pointed as the best example because during the electoral campaign he used populist refrains accusing the political elite, but always hiding that he also belonged to the elite.

In terms of the third criterium, the way populist parties define the people and the elite inside the borders of their countries, I partially accept Kyle & Gultchin (2018) proposal but retiring a modality and adding a new one. Thus, I propose a three-branches typology: cultural or identitarian, socioeconomic, and digital populism, also called 2.0.

Cultural populist parties conceive the true people as “only members of a native group” and, while incumbents, they impede or disrupt “new entrants or cultural outsiders” claiming that they “pose a threat to the nation-state” (Kyle & Gultchin, 2018, p. 14). Thus, cultural populism often uses some elements of the nationalist ideology and assumes xenophobic and racist attitudes, trying to keep the purity of the people, and avoiding any ethnic or religious mixture.

This modality of populism usually appears when a far right-wing populist antisystem party becomes incumbent, as it happened, for example, with Fidesz in Hungary and PiS in Poland.

In what respects to socioeconomic populism, Tsatsanis, Andreadis & Teperoglou (2018, p. 429) analyzed the populism from below, and proved that “, the relationship between low education levels and public sector employment with populist attitudes provides some support to the thesis that the so-called ‘losers of globalisation’ are more likely to adopt populist world views as a reaction to their decreasing life chances in a globalising world”, i.e. the pure people are the victims of globalization.

Concerning the use of the web as the main or the sole platform for the populist message, in opposition to the previous types, appears the digital populism or populism 2.0., the designation created by Paolo Gerbaudo in 2014, in the chapter “Populism 2.0: Social media activism, the generic Internet user and interactive direct democracy” of the book whose title was; *Social Media, Politics and the State Protests, Revolutions, Riots, Crime and Policing in the Age of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube*.

In accordance with this modality of populism, the people consist of those who are connected through the net, being the Movement 5 Stele the best example despite Gerbaudo’s focus on the Greek Golden Dawn. In his case-study, Gerbaudo concluded that “social media, then, through party member accounts that attempt daily to create a mediated intimacy, can become an instrument of the broader scope of Nazis to both disarticulate and occupy liberal power and the state apparatus in its existing form”. Some years later, Gerbaudo (2018) would repeat the same conclusion arguing that “the match between social media and populist politics derives from the way in which the mass networking capabilities of social media, at the time of a ‘mass web’ involving billions of people worldwide, provide a suitable channel for the mass politics and the appeals to the people typical of populism”.

Nowadays, mainstream parties are also migrating to the net, but maintaining the previous logic while digital populist parties consider the net their main or almost unique mean of communication, creating a digital democracy which is close to a plebiscitary model. Nadal (2021) analyzed the strategy of the Spanish left-wing populist party Podemos and came to the conclusion that “the participatory promise of digital parties often degenerated into plebiscitarianism 2.0”, proving that Podemos built a that “project to turn widespread public disaffection into political power—a project that, as populism typically does, involved the use of plebiscitarian linkages and, therefore, was contradictory to the promise of promoting participatory democracy”. In this connection, Momoc (2018, p. 69) explains the emergence of this type of populism taking into account that “the common people have turned into the generic Internet users, and the direct democracy has become democracy 2.0”. Thus, “Democracy 2.0 designates a democratic project that makes use of the interactive features of Web 2.0, such as liking, commenting and sharing”, and “these features are adopted as the means of a permanent consultation, of a plebiscitary cyber-democracy”, once “they are based on the principle of ‘one like, one vote’, and

the so-called digital democracy has made populism 2.0 possible”.

Returning to socioeconomic populism, “the pure people belong to a specific social class” (Kyle & Gultchin, 2018, p. 14), that’s to say, the explored members of the working class, the left-behinds. Those who, despite being responsible for the production, are obliged to live with low salaries and the threat of unemployment. Many left-wing populist parties, namely the Spanish Podemos, the Portuguese Left Bloc, and the Greek Syriza belong to this type of populism.

As the quoted authors consider that the pure people “may transcend national boundaries” (p. 13), this leads to the fifth criterium, and a new type of populism: the transnational or the civilizational one. This modality explains not only Steve Bannon’s efforts to produce a European far right-wing populist implosion across the European Union, but also the DIEM 25 Project, led by the former Greek Finance minister Yannis Varoufakis, trying to involve the left-wing populist parties. In both cases, the pure people go beyond the borders of each country as it also happens when the religious element is added, as it is occurring in Turkey. Indeed, according to Ihsan Yilmaz & Kainat Shakil (2021), “the highly politicized, Ottomanist themes of Ertugrul Ghazi, a Turkish television drama, are a manifestation of Turkey’s desire to expand its cultural borders” and represents a form of transnational populism because “the show depicts Turks as the protagonists dealing with contemporary political issues, «settling» accounts with their enemies as they steadfastly practise the faith of Islam”, being sure that “these ideals facilitates the construction of a transnational populist civilizational cultural identity which surpasses nationalism”. Thus, “the show and its themes have resonated with the Pakistani version of Islamist populism”. Moreover, “on the domestic level, Ertugrul Ghazi has made Pakistani and Turkish cultures synonymous”, and “this penetration of civilizational populism is cross-cutting”⁴.

Transnational populism is not a utopia. It is already a reality because it does exist, and, according to De Cleen, Moffitt, Panayotu & Stavrakakis (2020), it faces difficulties, but it also has potentials. Möller (2021, pp. 2-3) also reenforces this point, referring that “transnational populisms remain entangled in a basic antinomy” because “on the one hand, it is possible to address crucial social divisions by invoking a transnational people” while “on the other hand, the political system in the international sphere is—up until now—constitutionalised in a way that privileges nationalist invocations and, thereby, makes it difficult to pursue transnational politics”, but the antinomy “may not necessarily be a sign of weakness”.

However, it is noteworthy mentioning that civilizational or transnational populism is quite different from international populism. In fact, in international populism there is an association of populist parties belonging to different countries, but each populist party presents itself only as the people of its country, while in transnational populism, the people is the Ummah belonging to different countries. Thus, when McDonnell & Werner (2020) analyzed “policy

⁴Available at <https://www.populismstudies.org/transnational-islamist-populism-between-pakistan-and-turkey-the-case-of-dirilis-ertugrul/>.always

positions, voting data, and interviews conducted over three years with senior figures from fourteen radical right populist parties and their partners” we should speak of international rather than transnational populism because, for example, Marine Le Pen accepted to belong to a populist European parliamentary group, but, despite sharing common visions with her foreign allies, she always presents herself as the voice of the French people, and the same happens with the leaders of other populist parties.

To sum up, and using De Cleen (2017) as the source quoted by Moller (2021, pp. 3-4), “international populism can be observed when agents coordinate their actions and raise common political claims in the international sphere by pitting the sovereignty of their respective national peoples against the elites while transnational populism “is defined by a transgressive movement which overcomes the reliance on a national people” and it “appeals to a ‘transnational people-as-underdog as a political subject that supersedes the boundaries of the nation-state, rather than merely linking up national people-as-underdogs”” (De Cleen 2017, p. 355).

Conclusion

This paper intended to reflect on populism, both on definition and myths and on typology. Moreover, it accepted the challenge to propose a new typology based on five criteria. Obviously, this typology uses elements of former typologies and mixes some of them while proposing new features. The main conclusion is that populism will continue being a kind of Cinderella’s shoe because the sole element common to all scholars is the existence of a fight between the pure people and the corrupt elite. All the other features, starting with the definition of pure people and corrupt elite, depend on the scholars’ vision.

It is also noteworthy to admit that the proposed typology, as well as its criteria, is far from consensual because a populist party can match the features of more than a type of populism. For example, during the 2016 electoral campaign, there was a close relationship between Trump’s main populist ideas and refrains. Thus, anti-establishment idea could be found in the slogan ‘drain the swamp’, and ‘lock her up’ referring to Hillary Clinton, and cultural populism was present in the refrains ‘Building a big beautiful wall’ and ‘Make America great again’. Moreover, as tweeters were Trump’s main way of communication his populism can also be classified as digital.

To sum up, I believe that this paper can be useful for a populist approach because “between 1990 and 2018, the number of populists in power around the world has increased a remarkable fivefold, from four to 20” (Kyle & Gultchin, 2018, p. 4), and populist parties, once incumbent, “are highly skilled at staying in power and pose an acute danger to democratic institutions” (Mounk & Kyle, 2018).

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