

# Populism

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This article reviews a selection of works on populism. Theoretical contributions concerning definitional and conceptual aspects of populism are discussed, as well as the conditions under which populism is likely. The focus is mainly on the relationship between populism and representative democracy. The overview of the theoretical literature shows that while in the 1960s there was no consensus on the meaning of populism, in the more recent literature there is agreement on at least two characteristics that are central to populism: a strong focus by populist leaders on the ‘people’, and an implicit or explicit reference to an ‘anti-group’, often the political elite, against which the ‘people’ is positioned. The usefulness of such a minimal definition is shown by looking at cases of populism in Russia, the United States, Western Europe and Latin America.

## A contested concept of populism?

If one wanted to sketch the development of populism as a field in political analysis, one could start with Ionescu and Gellner (1969), whose comprehensive edition counts as “*the* definite collection on populism” according to Taggart (2000, 15, italics in original). Ionescu and Gellner (1969) address the question of whether populism is a unitary concept by asking, first, whether populism is an ideology, a “recurring mentality appearing in different historical and geographic contexts as the result of a special social situation faced by societies in which the middle social factors were either missing or too weak” (p.3), whether populism can be defined in terms of political psychology or as an anti-phenomenon, if populism is a people-worshipping phenomenon, or finally, if populism can be subsumed under nationalism, socialism, and peasantry.

This laundry list of characteristics of populism illustrates the confusion that can occur when dealing with populism. Ionescu and Gellner never settled on a definition of populism (Taggart 2000), which remained a contested concept. However, more recently authors such as for instance Panizza (2005) have suggested that there is a significant scholarly agreement on the analytical core of populism. In particular, populism is understood as an anti-phenomenon and as a people-worshipping phenomenon.

This article gives an overview and interpretation of the literature on populism with the goal of structuring the various definitions and historical accounts. While this overview must remain incomplete, I try to include the main theoretical approaches as well as historical and contemporary accounts and analyses of specific manifestations of populism in various countries, regions and eras.<sup>1</sup>

Of these two types of literature, the second is much larger than the first. There are far more contributions, especially in scientific journals, about specific cases of populism than theoretical discussions of the concept itself. This observation is confirmed by Taggart (2000), who finds it “surprising how little attention populism has received as a concept” (p.10). The reason for this bias might be the result as well as the expression of the

difficulty in finding a smallest common denominator that holds for each empirical case. However, theoretical analyses of the concept of populism are at the core of the scientific interest. While case studies of different populist parties and leaders may serve to illustrate theoretical aspects, the focus of a systematic analysis should be on the theoretical approaches rather than on the myriad of manifestations of populism.

First, I will give an overview of the theoretical works on the definition(s) of populism and related aspects commonly discussed. Second, I turn to the conditions under which populism is likely. For instance, socioeconomic conditions, crises of various kinds and charismatic leaders often accompany and even promote the occurrence of populism. Indeed, representative democracy itself constitutes a setting in which populism often flourishes. In the last section of this article, I describe how populism in Russia, the United States, Western Europe and Latin America has been observed and analyzed, and how a minimal definition of populism can be a useful guide for the literature on these cases.

## Definitions

Strikingly, even some of the works on populism regarded as ground-breaking and substantial like Ionescu and Gellner (1969) fail to state explicitly what they mean by the term. Likewise, Margaret Canovan’s *Populism* (1981) comes up with a typology of populism which basically consist of two categories, namely *agrarian populism* and *political populism*. They are further subdivided into a total of seven different kinds of populism – yet, what they have in common is left to the reader to ponder. Even though Taggart calls Canovan’s work the “most ambitious attempt to get to grips with populism” (Taggart 2000, 18), he also points to the fact that it does not suggest any common core to the phenomenon of populism on the basis of the wide range of phenomena covered in it. Lutz (1982) also voices the criticism that the book includes cases of populism rather uncritically.

Similarly, the definition by Wiles (1969), which lists twenty-four characteristics of populism, is not really helpful for identifying cases of populism because of its limited empirical applicability.

<sup>1</sup> Ionescu and Gellner (1969a) call these the two meanings of populism.

Berlin et al. (1968) show somewhat more restraint by providing a definition consisting of six features, including the importance of the people (*Gemeinschaft*) and the rejection of politics, i.e., the return to the natural condition of society before the introduction of any political system. These authors also suggest that modernization generates populism. Yet, these multifaceted contributions are little help when it comes to analyzing the phenomenon of populism. They can give us an intuition of what populism is all about, but do not provide a systematic understanding of its essence.

A better approach is that of Mény and Surel (2000; 2002). They reduce the number of populism's core characteristics to those three they claim to be its essential aspects. First, the 'people' is of paramount importance. Here, a feeling of community is stressed, and horizontal cleavages (such as left-right) are played down while vertical ones are played up for the purpose of excluding particular groups, e.g. elites and immigrants. Second, populists claim that the 'people' has been betrayed by the elites through their abuse of power, corruption etc. Third, populists demand that the "primacy of the people" (p. 13) has to be restored. In short: the current elites would have to be replaced and in their place the new leaders (the populists) would act for the good of the 'people'.

Taggart (2000; 2002) agrees with two of these three points. He agrees with the importance of the 'people', since populists tend to identify with a heartland that represents an idealized conception of the community to which they belong. This imagined entity is the 'people.' Second, antagonism towards a constructed 'other' is central, which is also highlighted by Panizza (2005), who refers to the anti-status quo dimension of populism. For Taggart, moreover, a key feature of populism is its hostility towards representative politics, which is viewed as a way of stealing power from the 'people.' Additionally, Taggart points to the necessity of a "sense of extreme crisis" (Taggart 2002, 69f) for populism to emerge.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, Mudde (2004) provides, in my opinion, the most to-the-point definition by limiting himself to the 'people' and its antagonistic 'other.' He conceives of populism as

an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people. (p.543)

To sum up, these definitions show us that the core aspects of populism are, first, the focus on the 'people' - whatever this term may refer to - and its sovereignty, and second, the antagonism between this 'people' and its 'other' - whatever this 'other' may be, the elite in a representative democracy, foreigners, or others.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, it seems that at least concerning these two definitional points, there is evidence in favor of an academic consensus, so I will use Mudde's definition as a working

<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Knight (1998) attenuates this statement by pointing out that attributing populism to crisis may be historically correct but, first, populism may occur in non-critical times and second, the term crisis is as fuzzy, if not fuzzier than populism. In my view, this aspect is a facilitating condition for populism rather than a defining characteristic. I deal with this issue in a later section of this article.

<sup>3</sup> This second element is not exactly new; according to Taggart (2000), Shils (1956) stressed the importance of the relationship between elites and masses for the notion of populism as well as the masses' distrust towards institutions.

definition of populism for the time being, discuss it in more detail below and refer to it in the section on historical accounts of populism.

### The 'People'

Who is the 'people'? In populist political communication, the term has a fundamental ambiguity (Mény and Surel 2002). 'People' can refer to the whole population of a country but also to a fraction of it. It may refer to only those individuals with a particular nationality or culture (excluding all other population groups) as is especially the case in right-wing populism, also called neo-populism (Betz and Immerfall 1998). For example, for the Lega Nord, the 'people' is the 'People of the North' in contrast to people from Southern Italy, which means that the 'people' is defined with reference to regions, the latter having alleged cultural connotations. When 'people' refers to a community of blood, culture and race, populism easily turns into racism (Mény and Surel 2002). Similarly, populism in much of Asia and Africa as well as in the Middle East operates on the basis of ethnicity and religion, and integrates "landowners, merchants, bureaucrats, clergy, armed forces" (Di Tella 1997, 193), in other words members of different classes, into one coherent group.

In contrast, the 'people' may indeed refer to a certain class or social base, which tends to be the case in left-wing populism. Peronists in Latin America defined the 'people' as the working class as opposed to the industrialists. Other examples include peasants in Russia or the 'petit-bourgeois' of the Poujadist movement in France. Developments in the recent past, however, made clear that not only left-wing but also right-wing populism draws on distinct social bases. For example, workers are overrepresented in the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) and the Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP), even though workers facing employment competition from abroad would be expected to opt for more protectionist state intervention and, hence, support parties on the left (Oesch 2008). Likewise, the Front National - as an example of the new radical right - was so successful in generating support from the working class that this has been termed left Lepenism (Surel 2002). One can see clearly that the meaning of the term 'people' changes depending on the context. This is a reason why it is hard to define populism and it probably contributes to the difficulty in pinpointing commonalities between different instances of populism.

As indicated above, Taggart (2002) explains the meaning of populism with reference to a heartland. What this term, however, actually refers to remains fuzzy in his elaborations; he states that it "represents an idealized conception of the community" and a "[retrospective] construction of an ideal world" (p. 67). Similar to Canovan (Canovan 1984), he argues that the term 'people' should not be used to define populism because of its ambiguity and instead the reference to a heartland should be the defining criterion. However, it is difficult to see how this terminological shift helps in any way since what the heartland refers to is as variable as the term 'people.'

Populists referring to the 'people' have two complementary objectives. First, they attempt to create a homogeneous, essentially undifferentiated community which deliberately excludes those not belonging, the 'other'. The 'people's' purported homogeneity as well as that of the rejected group nevertheless stand in great contrast to the reality of more or less heterogeneous groups in society. In a pluralistic democracy,

government is essentially government by minorities, which may refer to many diverse groups such as ethnic groups, business organizations, trade unions, students or women's collectives (Held 2006); Dahl (1956) termed this 'polyarchy', characterized by open competition and compromises between different groups, a system which prevents a tyranny of the majority. Populism involves a denial of the real complexity of different societal groups and it also entails a reduction of all differences between in-group and out-group to one all-encompassing difference. Other societal group features are at least implicitly declared to be non-existing, or at least not important, compromises with or concessions to such groups are consequently unnecessary. The tyranny of the majority' becomes a real danger.

### Populism as anti-phenomenon

The second core aspect of populism in the literature concerns the 'people's' posture towards a perceived 'other.' This 'other' can be individual government representatives or the whole political elite, high finance and big business as well as immigrant workers from poor countries, etc. Sometimes the 'other' serves as reference point for the constitution of the 'people'; the latter is then defined primarily in terms of what it is *not*. The playing up of the contrast between the 'people' and its 'other' is at the very core of populism. Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979) spells out why this is important: associating oneself with one group and distancing oneself from another group is a prerequisite for creating one's own personal identity. The identity is strengthened by stressing the positive features of one's own group and highlighting negative features of the other group (Jonas, Stroebe, and Hewstone 2007), which, however, often leads to discrimination and conflict. As early as in the 1960s, Worsley (1969) pointed out that populism often occurs when there is a conflict between the society (the 'people') and the external world (the 'other'). In this vein, Canovan (1984, 59) states that "the notion of 'the people' as distinct from a collection of individuals or groups is one of those collective ideas that make sense only through an implied *contrast with something else*" (italics not in original). This is a phenomenon which Knight (1998) elegantly terms "the dichotomization of 'people'" (p.229). Likewise, Panizza stresses, referring to Laclau (2005), that "populism depends not only on a sense of internal homogeneity but also on a constitutive outside – a threatening heterogeneity against which the identity is formed" (Panizza 2005, 17).

The close relationship between the 'people' and its 'other' is apparent in Laclau's (1979) classification of populism as either an ideology or a movement. For the reasons elaborated on above, this decision is not easily made. On the one hand, populism as movement stresses the actors involved. Who mobilizes? Who is the 'people'? Since Laclau's analysis focuses on Latin America, social classes play a central role in his conception of populism. On the other hand, populism as ideology puts the stress on the objectives of populism. What do populists and their followers try to achieve? What do they oppose? As indicated, the distinction between populism as ideology and populism as movement is not as clear cut as it may seem, since there is considerable correlation between who the 'people' is and what its objectives are. The fact that three of the four approaches to populism listed by Laclau consider populism as *both* ideology and movement, rather than either or, illustrates the difficulty in distinguishing analytically between movement and ideology.

The demarcation between the 'people' and the 'other' expresses itself as resentment. Resentments are instances of popular frustration, Panizza (2005) speaks of them as "unmet demands" and notes that populists operate in a realm "where people do not know how to name what they are lacking" (p.10). A variety of entities may be the target of resentments; right-wing populists probably target an immigrant community or any minority group that is perceived to enjoy unwarranted preferential treatment; left-wing populists' resentments may concern international corporations and capitalists generally. Resentments usually involve the attribution of blame and the demand for compensation of some kind and play a particularly significant role in the initial mobilization phase of populist movements (Betz 2002).

As Taggart (2000) states, populism's stress on the community juxtaposes it to (individualist) liberalism. However, the observation that in Latin America populism and neo-liberalism seem to go together well - populists there used drastic market reforms to gather support (Weyland 1999) - contradicts this view. Likewise, Kitschelt and McGann (1995) speak of west European right-wing populists' winning formula, a combination of cultural protectionism and economic neo-liberalism.

### Conditions promoting the emergence of populism

In the literature, there are many conditions said to promote the emergence of populism. I will discuss three aspects; first, poor socioeconomic conditions or other crises, which are recurring themes, especially concerning Latin America. Second, the opaqueness of political institutions is thought to be related to or even cause the emergence of populism. Third, charismatic leaders adopting a certain style and rhetoric seem to be characteristic for populist movements.

#### Socioeconomic conditions and crises

According to Taggart (2000, 12), "it has been an underlying continuity in many definitions of populism, that it is a reaction to modernity or to a particular feature of the modern world." Globalization, unfavorable economic development and other structural conditions that produce cleavages and disadvantage certain groups are seen as necessary factors leading to populist politics. Di Tella (1965), too, suggests that populism is a function of economic development. But is this really the case? Evidence against this comes, for example, from Panizza (2005). He points to the following as conditions for the emergence of populism: first, the breakdown of social order and the loss of confidence in the political system's ability to restore it. Typical for situations such as these are economic crises leading to social disruptions. However, civil wars, natural catastrophes, or political misbehavior and a corrupt or self-serving elite can be triggers, too. Rather than modernity, it is a situation of general upheaval and change that is typical for the emergence of populism. The crisis can be real, but also constructed – a situation can be framed as a crisis in order that 'solutions' may be offered. Candidates for those who may seek to play this role can be found in classes or class fractions, whose ideological dominance is endangered (Laclau 1979, 197).

Relatedly, Weyland (1999; 2001), who predominantly investigates cases of populism in Latin America, confirms that during the 1980s and 1990s, populist politics reemerged in very different socioeconomic settings as we will see later on in this

article, which has to do with the varying notions of the ‘people.’ Hence, neither deteriorating political nor economic conditions necessarily lead to populism, although populism might be the reaction to a (sense of) crisis - the reasons for the crisis itself can nevertheless be manifold. A consequence is that populism is short-lived and episodic – it surges only during the crisis. Yet, a crisis may not even be necessary for populism to occur; populism may also be rooted in the very way democracy works. This view will be examined in the next paragraph.

## Populism and representative democracy

### The democratic paradox

The idea presented directly above, that populism is necessarily related to crises, is contradicted – or sometimes complemented – by Canovan (Canovan 1999, 2), who states that the “sources of populism lie not only in the social context that supplies the grievances of any particular movement, but are to be found in tensions at the heart of democracy.” More precisely, they lie at the heart of representative democracy. Canovan (2002) elaborates on the relationship between representative democracy and populism by describing how the inclusion of an increasing amount of people in the decision-making process leads to an increase in the level of opaqueness as to who rules whom, and how. The growing gap between the voters and their representatives results in populist leaders claiming to close that gap by ‘putting the power back’ into the ‘people’s’ hand. In Mair’s (2002) view, voters lose trust in the problem-solving capacity of the constitutional system, which becomes less and less attractive for the electorate. Under such circumstances, populism might fulfill the task of linking “an increasingly undifferentiated and depoliticized electorate with a largely neutral and non-partisan system of governance” (p.84).

However, what populists overlook is the way democracy inherently works, which can at times be difficult to understand. This hints at what Canovan (2002) calls the democratic paradox. The more power is distributed among an increasing number of people, the less localizable it becomes, which means that policies are the result not of a clear act of will, but of interactions and adjustments between many actors. In a democracy, power must necessarily be dispersed and diffuse rather than concentrated. Constitutionalism and the ‘visibility’ of the political decision-making process may be antipodes by their very nature (Papadopoulos 2002).

Through this lens, populism is the almost inevitable product of the interplay between the ‘two faces of democracy’, the ‘redemptive’ and the ‘pragmatic’ faces (Canovan 1999). These two concepts are based on Oakeshott’s ‘politics of faith’ and ‘politics of scepticism’ (as cited by Canovan). The pragmatic face relates to the institutions of a democracy (“multi-party system, free elections, pressure groups, lobbying and the rest of the elaborate battery of institutions and practices by which we distinguish democratic from other modern polities” (p.11)), whereas the redemptive face stresses “the promise of a better world through action by the sovereign people. [...] Power to the people; we, the people, are to take charge of our lives and to decide our own future” (p.11).

Between these two faces of democracy many tensions exist, tensions which can give rise to populism. First, if the redemptive face’s promise of a better and more just world cannot be kept, populism emerges and the populists will purport to be able to keep that promise. Second, if the will of the ‘people’ is not or

cannot be implemented, populists seek to replace current elites (and at the same time they create the opportunity for other populists to step in if they themselves cannot keep their promises). Third, characteristic for the redemptive face is a dislike of institutions that come between the ‘people’ and the expression of their will, which should be unmediated. These contradictions between the redemptive and pragmatic faces of democracy open up room for populism.

### Populism and the party system

If populism is a phenomenon that occurs in response to characteristics of the representative system, it can be seen as a force that favors or pushes for direct democracy. Max Weber, in his famous ‘Politics as a Vocation’ (1919), uses England’s political party system in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to demonstrate how charismatic leaders systematically exploit or bypass the party system to influence the masses – a phenomenon that can arguably be called populism. While his view on political leadership is a rather negative one – the members of the parliament “are normally nothing better than well-disciplined ‘yes’ men”, and this ‘machine’ is kept in check by the leaders. The result according to him is a plebiscitarian democracy.

Mair (2000) describes a development in Britain at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which has similar characteristics: Tony Blair, Labour Party leader and eventually Prime Minister, seems to have wanted to “take the party itself out of the equation” (p.26) by promoting an ‘un partito, una voce’ approach. In this way, Mair argues, key characteristics of a populist democracy were introduced: party and parliament were increasingly neutralized or side-lined, and plebiscitarian techniques introduced. The spotlight was increasingly on the party leader, who – oftentimes a charismatic character – cast himself in the role of the true voice of the ‘people’.

### Populism - a pathology of democracy?

While Canovan suggests that populist ideology is almost inevitable in representative democracies, populism has also been termed a pathology and a corruption of democracy (Mény and Surel 2002), since many populists seem to be seducers rather than educators and sometimes rely heavily on their personal charisma, propaganda and audience manipulation to gather followers and to achieve their goals. These are some of reasons why the term populism has a negative connotation; usually, movements or leaders reject the term as a description of themselves or their strategies (Panizza 2005), and populism is often used as disqualifying label.

From another perspective, however, populism may also be interpreted in a positive sense, as a “fever warning” (Mény and Surel 2002, 15) it may serve as a signal to the elite, highlighting the defects of a representative political system. In this sense, Taggart (2000) suggests that populism is a health indicator in representative political systems since it draws attention to any occasional malfunctioning that might befall the political system. Elites might thus become aware that they need to take politics to the ‘people’ (Canovan 2002). Panizza (2005) similarly refers to populism as a mirror of democracy in the sense that it reflects the nature of democracy and so renders problems visible. Since through checks and balances as well as the through the aggregation of diverging preferences and limitation through for instance the rule of law, the will of the ‘people’ is not and cannot be a pure, unadulterated force.

### The institutional paradox of populism

Another aspect of populism addressed by several authors is its institutional dilemma or paradox (Mény and Surel 2002; Papadopoulos 2002; Taggart 2000, 2002). While appearing to entail an entirely negative attitude towards institutions, populism is actually highly ambiguous in this respect. Populists usually reject party systems and all representational structures, but at the same time they claim to be better representatives of the 'people' than the establishment, and populists use the representative system to express themselves and to win support. Surel (2002) calls this the dual hybridization of populism: on the one hand, populists challenge the system's shortcomings, on the other hand they must remain part of the system.

Mair (2002), who distinguishes between the notion of populist protest movements with anti-establishment sentiments and the notion of a mainstream populist democracy as the "two senses of populism" (p.88)<sup>4</sup>, claims that the anti-establishment conception is not sustainable, and cannot be so because "maintaining an anti-establishment rhetoric whilst dominating the key positions within the governing elite will eventually seem implausible" (p.93). Yet, this reasoning has not prevented politicians like Blair or Jacques Chirac from succeeding in doing exactly that. The institutional paradox of populism entails that populists may have to rely on the very institutional means and structures that they criticize. Still, populists try to avoid this institutional dilemma by relying on direct democracy since this means direct contact with the population and by - theoretically, at least - bypassing the party system (Taggart 2000).

A related aspect is that once a populist party (or movement, or leader) has taken over power, it must necessarily become part of the constitutional system, in order to survive and to be able to actually rule. In the process, it may lose its appeal in the eyes of its voters, who supported it *because* of its critique of the representative system. This phenomenon is most neatly summed up by "success in opposition – failure in government" (Heinisch 2003, 91) and could, for example, be observed during the rise of the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs in the 1990s and its decline or "implosion" (Luther 2003, 136) in 2002 after having seized power in 2000. A counterexample is provided by New Labour in Britain, which has displayed populist elements before and after taking power in 1997 (Mair 2002).

To summarize, the relationship between populism and representative democracy is highly paradox. On the one hand, it is characterized by antagonism, noticeable in populists' stance against parties and institutions. On the other hand, populism is inevitably connected with representative democracy: populism only works in opposition to the 'other'; with regard to representative democracy, populists claim to, and sometimes in fact also do, uncover political ills and instances of system malfunctioning. And, as we have seen, populism may even be an inevitable product of the democratic process.

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<sup>4</sup> Populism as protest movement is in his view a mobilization of popular support against established elites and institutions, stressing substance. Populism as ideology focuses on the processes and linkages in populist democracies, characterized by an unmediated relationship between government and the people in a party-free environment.

## Charismatic leaders and populist style

If political institutions like parties can be portrayed as impediments to direct, popular sovereignty, it is tempting for charismatic, populist leaders to try to exploit the purported gap between the 'people' and the mainstream political establishment. Contemporary examples like Silvio Berlusconi, Jean-Marie LePen or Jörg Haider suggest that often one single person is the driving force of a populist movement, and populist parties usually remain small. Personalistic leaders make sure that the traditional linkage involving parties or parliament is removed; no mediation is tolerated between the leader and the 'people.' According to Eatwell (2003), charismatic leaders are often held responsible for the rise of populism, right-wing populism in particular, due to the leader's direct appeal to voters. Yet, some disagree that charismatic leaders are the actual *cause* of emergent populism. Quite possibly the attribution of charisma occurs only once the leader had some success at the polls (Van Der Brug and Mughan 2007).

These politicians nevertheless stand out due to their characteristic populist style and rhetorics. Tarchi (2002) points to the populist style adopted by Berlusconi, who claimed to be 'one of you,' the 'people' - similar to LePen ('I am one of you'). Chirac did the same by repeatedly positioning himself apart from the elite and turning towards the 'people' (Chirac 1994). In Latin American examples of populism a particular populist style and rhetoric could be identified in the speeches of the populists Getúlio Vargas and Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, both of whom stressed the bond between themselves and the 'people' (Knight 1998). Populist messages tend to be simplistic and straightforward in order to appeal to the common sense of the ordinary people (Betz 2002). Proposed solutions to political problems are necessarily transparent and easily understandable, otherwise they do not pass muster with populists. If any kind of experts are involved or a public policy has any degree of complexity, then populists smell "a self-serving racket perpetuated by professional politicians" (Canovan 1999, 6). This, of course, is exactly one of the reasons why populism has such a negative connotation – complex issues like (un)employment, health or economic prosperity are unlikely to have simple solutions, hence populists are often said to oversimplify problems.

With this background, it makes more sense to ask *to what degree* a movement or a campaign is populist rather than asking whether or not it *is* populist (Laclau 2005). For example, concerning Berlusconi, opinions are divided as to the degree to which he can be considered a genuine populist. While he did use certain rhetoric to associate himself with the 'people,' he did not hide his affluence and sumptuous life style, which certainly distinguishes him from the common man. Hence, it may be incorrect or insufficient to depict him as an authentic populist, and more adequate to include the "material constitution of his project" (Ginsborg 2004, 122) in his characterization.

The case of Berlusconi perfectly illustrates that due to the increase in media use, the opportunities for populist leaders to market themselves and their scope of influence have increased, and the political stage has moved to television and radio, a phenomenon termed the "mediatization of politics" (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Mazzoleni, Stewart, and Horsfield 2003). Panizza (2005) moreover observes that populism is underpinned by new forms of political representation such as TV or radio, both of which are increasingly used to make appeals to the 'people'. The media provides opportunities for charismatic

personalities to gather the masses around them, and this presentation of leadership may be essential for the success of a populist party, as already mentioned. This development may be one of the reasons why populism has entered mainstream politics: at least since the early 1990s, populism has become a regular feature of politics in Western democracies (Mudde 2004).<sup>5</sup> Yet, this might not only have to do with the actual shortcomings of mainstream, representative politics or the actual workings of representative democracy, but also with the way the media represents these things. Negative and sensationalist angles are likely to receive particular coverage, which normally plays into the hands of populists.

## Historical accounts

As stated at the outset of this article, the literature on populism mainly deals with specific accounts of certain countries or regions where populism – however defined – is deemed to have emerged. In this section, I will give a broad-brush overview of the most important contributions regarding Russia, the United States, Europe and Argentina, and wherever applicable link them to the theoretical points discussed in previous sections of this article.

### Populism in Russia

It has been said that “russian populism is, if viewed carefully, a powerful illuminator of universal elements of populism” (Taggart 2000, 54). The truth of this statement is nevertheless not so clear. Russian populism is inextricably linked to the notions of *narodnichestvo*, the ‘populist ideology’, and *narodniki*, its adherents. *Narodnichestvo* refers to the spirit that led Russian intellectuals in the 1870s to go from the cities to the countryside to attempt to generate a peasant rebellion against the Tsarist regime (Taggart 2000). However, the peasantry showed a considerable lack of revolutionary energy and even turned against the intellectuals, who then opposed the regime directly (Canovan 1981).

What were the characteristics and goals of this instance of populism? First of all, there is disagreement on whether or not we are really dealing with a populist *movement* here. Walicki (1969) and Taggart (2000) suggest that we do not, and that it is instead a case of populist *ideology*; the revolt ended in a debacle since the peasants could simply not be mobilized. Nevertheless, Canovan (1981) suggests that it was indeed a movement although she admits that it was a movement not primarily of the ‘people’ (the peasantry), but of a group of intellectuals who had faith – however misplaced – in the revolutionary potential of the peasantry. In any case, the anti-establishment aspect is apparent in the emphasized contrast between the populist ideology of the intellectuals and the Tsarist regime.

Concerning goals and ideologies, Walicki (1969) stresses the two meanings of *narodnichestvo*, the first one being a theory “advocating the hegemony of the masses over the educated elite” (p.63), stressing the peasants’ ‘real’ needs instead of Western socialist ideals. The second meaning is the rather Marxist idea of fostering a non-capitalist development of Russia. While Walicki suggests that the latter meaning of *narodnichestvo* was the more appropriate one in this context, Canovan maintains that Russian populists had “faith in the

<sup>5</sup> Ironically, as Mudde observes, many mainstream politicians have used populist styles exactly to counter populists’ attacks.

power of dedicated and high-minded individuals to change the course of history” (p.83), and so favors the first meaning. Another disagreement between these two authors concerns the origin of the ideology; while Walicki states that it was an anti-capitalist expression of the ‘small producers’, i.e. the peasantry, Canovan again points out that the peasants did not want to have anything to do with the revolution.

Does the *narodniki* phenomenon qualify as populism, as defined by Mudde? There was obviously quite a distance between the populists and the ‘people’, the *narod*, whose way of life was romanticized and simplified, and this might be an argument against speaking of populism here. However, the intellectuals were explicitly referring to the *people’s* demands and were striving to further its interests, be it land reform or liberty from landowners and the state. To conclude, in the case of Russian populism we find core aspects of populism – the focus on the ‘people’ as well as the distinction between the ‘people’ (the peasants) and the ‘other’, the Tsarist regime. But since the *narodniki’s* attitude was rather anti-political – social goals appeared to be more important than political goals (Canovan 1981) – the *narodniki* phenomenon seems to be a highly unique case very different from populism elsewhere.

### Populism in the United States

Even before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, central populist themes such as anti-governmentalism, egalitarianism and anti-elitism have played a crucial role in American politics (Ware 2002). Yet, nineteenth-century populism in the United States seems to be a “paradigm case of populism for American scholars” (Canovan 1981, 10). As Ware argues, during nation-building after the Civil War, ‘American values’ became important<sup>6</sup>, and those who did not respect or conform to these American values were not part of the ‘people’ (which in any case consisted of the white population only).<sup>7</sup> In 1891, the People’s Party, a classical populist movement, came into being. Supported mostly by farmers, its goals concerned national ownership of railroads, reduced inflation, and the general enhancement and advancement of popular referendums as a political institution. The monetary system was a particular target of protest (Canovan 1981).

In Canovan’s view, the People’s Party was both an agrarian movement with a specific socioeconomic base and a political movement: it was directed against the elite (consisting of politicians and other, non-elected experts). On this view, the People’s Party classifies as a populist party according to Mudde’s definition: the ‘people’ were peasants, who opposed the elite. However, Hofstadter (1969, 9) objects that instead of a peasantry, the United States had a class of ambitious entrepreneurs exclusively recruited from farms. Either way, the People’s Party did not think of itself as a movement of rural or sectional interests, but as an uprising of all the working people with the goal of equal distribution of economic, political, and cultural power.

Yet, the People’s Party movement was rather short-lived since it soon merged with the Democratic Party. From then on, especially since the 1960s, populism has been a central theme in American politics. One reason for this was that when the presidential nomination process was transformed, the power to

<sup>6</sup> However, these were a rather “unexamined amalgam of values” (Foley 1991, 227-220, quoted in Ware 2002, 106).

<sup>7</sup> Note how the ‘people’ is created with reference to the ‘other’, and how homogeneous both groups are perceived to be.

nominate candidates moved away from the party elites to the candidates themselves, and, hence, candidate-centered politics became important (Ware 2002). Populism in the United States is nowadays not considered to be the politics of outsiders, but as part of the political mainstream (Kazin 1995; Ware 2002). In other words, no single populist movement can be observed, instead both major parties employ populist rhetoric, with appeals to the 'little taxpayer' struggling against the government (Ware 2002). This phenomenon illustrates the core aspects of populism as defined above as well as populism's institutional paradox: anti-elite rhetoric from within the government itself.

### Populism in Western Europe

Contemporary populism in Western Europe is mainly associated with the radical right (Mudde 2004). Examples of right-wing populist parties include the already mentioned Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) with its late leader Haider, the Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP), the Lega Nord in Italy, the German Republikaner, Le Pen's Front National in France, the Danish People's Party's, and Vlaams Blok in Flanders. All of them appeal to resentments in the population. In Switzerland, nationalism is an important populist theme. In Italy, there are resentments towards the political class in Rome and Southern Italy. In Austria, the target of populism has been clientelism as a way of 'doing (political) business' as well as the Jewish community. In Denmark, the concern was primarily immigration and refugees. In Germany, the Republikaner were able to drum up resentments associated with confronting the (Nazi) past (Betz 2002). Not surprisingly, these parties have been associated with neo-fascism and racism (Taggart 1996).

While there are many common elements to these parties, they can be further divided into those that belong to the new radical right and those that are anti-statist (Kitschelt 2002). Differences between these two categories concern the parties' main commitment. In the case of the new radical right, the winning formula is a combination of neo-liberal market policies (as opposed to welfare state policies) and a "socially and politically authoritarian and xenophobic agenda" (Kitschelt 2002, 180). Typically, as indicated above, their voters tend to be blue-collar, examples of that include the Swiss SVP and the French Front National. In contrast, anti-statist parties are also concerned with political economy but primarily concern themselves with alleged cronyism between corrupt politicians and business. Here, neo-liberal market policies are pursued in order to undercut rent-seeking, whereas the anti-immigrant stance is essentially coincidental (1969). In contrast to the new radical right, one can find more highly educated people among the supporters for anti-statist parties, such as the FPÖ and Lega Nord.

New radical right and anti-statist parties illustrate the two core aspects of populism as defined above by Mudde. In the first case, the 'people' is equivalent to the indigenous population of a country and is construed in contrast to immigrants as well as the wealthier portion of the population. With respect to anti-statist parties, one can see how the population is dichotomized into the apparently deceived electorate on the one hand, and on the other hand a fraudulent elite whose linkages to business and interest groups are the alleged reason for general economic decline.

Currently, left-wing populist parties do not feature as prominently on the political stage in Western Europe as right-wing ones. Left-wing populists usually define the 'people' as consisting of the working class, the 'other' being capitalism and

capitalists, along with their side-kicks in government. Mudde (2004) lists two examples: in Britain, the already mentioned New Labour Party under Blair "presents itself as the champion of the (true) English people against the privileges of the (upper class) elite" (Mudde 2004, 551). The main cleavage here is obviously class, with 'people' referring to the working class. In Flanders, the Flemish Socialist Party leader Steve Stevaert appealed to the "wisdom of the people" and rejected authority (Mudde 2004, 551); the core characteristics of populism are clearly visible here. Die Linke, a left-wing populist party in Germany, rejects big business, privatization and capitalism in general, and stresses solidarity with the working class. Analogous to the Front National, die Linke was able to attract voters from the right by pointing to the apparent threat of immigrant workers.

### Populism in Latin America

Most authors have discussed populism in Latin America using a cumulative definition, that is, one that encompasses various aspects from different domains. Weyland (2001) states that those traditional definitions assumed "a close connection between populist politics and its social roots, socioeconomic background conditions, and/or substantive policies, especially expansionary economic programs and generous distributive measures" (p. 5). Similar to modernization theory and dependency theory, this perspective stresses the underlying economic conditions and development as factors shaping politics, especially during the 1930s-1960s. Even though he shifts the focus towards the leadership aspect of populism as mentioned above, Weyland (1999) claims that even today, neo-liberal economics and populist politics are quite compatible in contemporary Latin America, as exemplified by Alberto Fujimori in Peru, Carlos Menem in Argentina, and Fernando Collor in Brazil.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, populism in Latin America is seen as a multi-class movement with the working class at its core (Weyland 2001). The working class was particularly featured during the Peronist heydays, which is why I will present it here as possibly Latin America's most famous manifestation of populism, to link theory and empirical evidence: Peronism has its roots in the expansion of the industrial economy after the recession in the 1930s, from which the working class, however, did not benefit - real wages were in decline (James 1988). Juan Perón, in 1943 Head of the Labor Department in Argentina, addressed some of the basic concerns of the emerging industrial labor force and was able to build on growing support until he was elected president of Argentina in 1946. When his government was ousted in 1955, he had to go into exile but even then he remained influential (Butler 1969). Why did Perón have such an effect on the people? What was the essence of Peronism?

There are different views on what made Peronism so successful. Gino Germani, as cited in James (1988, 2), believes that "passive, manipulated urban masses which result from an incomplete modernization process" were central to the triumph of Peronism. Kahl (1981) provides another description of Germani's view on Peronism: "the particular quality of Peronism was linked to cultural habits of recent rural migrants to the city who needed a personalistic and charismatic leader to formulate their demands" (Kahl 1981, 188). Germani saw the workers as being used by the elites, and this was possible because the workers did not have a social and political identity

<sup>8</sup> He also lists as reason for the possibility of populist elements in Latin American politics a weak party system.

of their own. James (1988) formulates the latter aspect in more positive terms. Peronism is, in his eyes, the redefinition of the notion of citizenship within a social context, which meant full political rights and political inclusion, but most importantly, these political aspects should not be separated from civil society, and especially not be implemented at the expense of the latter. Moreover, a more transcendental aspect of Peronism is the recognition of workers as a class and a distinct social force, not through parties and formal rights but through trade unions.

In terms of Mudde's minimal definition of populism, the 'people' were the disadvantaged working class, who revolted against the old establishment and the industrialists exploiting the work force. Moreover, Peronism was essentially anti-party, being only weakly institutionalized. Perón himself stressed that "Peronism is a national movement committed to real democracy, not a political party preoccupied with formal democracy" (McGuire 1997, 1). These findings correspond to the two core aspects of populism as defined above. Finally, underlying and facilitating conditions, in this case industrial development and modernization, are a major characteristic of Peronism even though it is questionable whether they should be part of a definition of populism.

## A short conclusion

On the basis of the short descriptions of populism in Russia, the United States, Western Europe and Latin America, the difficulties connected with developing a definition become visible. It hardly surprises that scholars struggle to settle on one definition. Yet, the analysis of the theoretical literature shows that the degree to which this concept is contested has declined. While Ionescu and Gellner could not agree on the core of populism in 1969, Mény and Surel (2000; 2002), Taggart (2000; 2002) and Mudde (2004), define populism in very similar terms. Hence, Panizza (2005) is not so far off the mark when he claims that there is an academic consensus.

Finding commonalities in the above cases of populism is obviously easier if one knows what to look for. Starting with a minimal definition of populism and trying to apply this definition to empirical cases facilitates determining whether one deals with populism or not. A minimal definition has the advantage that one gets a tight grip on what populism is, the theoretical discussion becomes less confusing because populism as a concept becomes distinguishable from other phenomena in politics. Worsley (1969) emphasizes the applicability and hence analytical usefulness of ideal types (Weber 1949), which synthesizes and unifies a multitude of empirical observations into a coherent construct.

Given the many instances of populism from all over the world throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, what are populism's future prospects? At least two factors indicate that populist elements in politics will remain or even increase. First, representative democracy almost inevitably goes along with populism, due to the democratic paradox. Hence, opportunities for populists who want to restore the power of the 'people' are not likely to wane. Second, the mediatization of politics is not likely to abate either. This renders many opportunities for populists to gather support by conveying simplified messages and presenting themselves as charismatic leaders and true representatives of the 'people.' Hence, populism is likely to continue to be part of politics and of political analysis.

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