

Populism Beyond the West: Dissonant Diversities and Fragmented Politics

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Populism is one of the most contested topics of our times. Even though the phenomenon is anything but new (see Ionescu and Gellner 1969), the increasing salience of populism and the rising power of populist actors around the globe have prompted a new wave of interest in the topic. Scholars have so far focused on a vast array of questions, such as the definition of populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, Mueller 2016, Laclau 2005) the difference between right-wing and left-wing populisms (Rama and Santana 2019), and the role of social media in the rise of populist actors as well as in the dissemination of populist logics and discourses (Crisley and Gillespie 2019; Salgado 2019). The nature of the relationship between populism and democracy (Pappas 2019; Urbinati 2019; Weyland and Madrid 2019), populism and nationalism (Brubaker 2017, 2019; De Cleen 2017), and populism and authoritarianism (Norris and Inglehart 2019) have also been of increasing interest to scholars.

While these analyses have a lot in common, they also greatly differ from each other due to the variety of the cases where populism is observed. Populists might apply different economic policies (Franzese 2019; Rodrik 2018), be on the right or on the left (March 2017; Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis 2019; Weyland 2013), resort to nationalism or nativism (Bonikowski et al 2018; Pappas 2018), or they might depart from democracy and turn into authoritarian actors or not (Dix 1985; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012). Despite this variety, however, existing accounts mostly adopt institutional and structural approaches,

paying little attention to the cultural component of populism (see Gidron and Hall 2019 for an exception underlining both cultural and structural explanations for populism). Questions such as how populist discourse influences and is influenced by social relations, how it transforms and is transformed by citizens' understandings as to "the people," and to each other, remain, to a large extent, unanswered. Thus, we still know little about how social cleavages shape the way "the people" is conceptualized by populist actors as well as how populist discourse shapes existing social cleavages. The few existing works on this topic turn their gaze towards either North American (Bonikowski et al. 2019) or European cases (Bornschier 2010). However, we believe that an emphasis on social cleavages is important and necessary in understanding how populism operates beyond Western democracies, particularly in historically diverse countries. Interestingly, such non-Western countries with multi-ethnic, multi-religious populations have so far received little attention from scholars. When non-Western cases are discussed in the literature, except for a few recent works on populism in Africa (Cheeseman 2018; Resnick 2017) and in Southeast Asia (Case 2017), Latin American countries featuring important examples of left-wing populism (De La Torre 2016) are usually the ones to take the centre-stage, to the detriment of others.

Against this background, in this special issue, we focus on the relationship between populism and ethnic and religious diversity beyond Western Europe and the Americas. We are particularly

interested in the following questions: What is the role of cultural and social grievances in the emergence and spread of populist discourses and vice versa? What differences, if any, are there between the form populism takes in historically diverse societies and the form it takes in societies where diversity is a fairly recent phenomenon related to immigration? How does populism relate to social, political, and affective polarization in post-imperial societies with multi-cultural populations?

Constructing “the people”: Historical diversity and social cleavages

Considering that the juxtaposition of “the people” against “the elites” is integral to populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017), understanding how “the people” is defined and to whom it refers is vital to any analysis of populism. This is where existing societal cleavages and historical diversity become important. In diverse societies with “historical others” populists tend to swiftly revive and mobilize the dormant (and sometimes not so dormant) societal divisions. Often, populist actors deploy existing social cleavages for their own benefit and utilize them in propagating a divisive discourse that represents social groups in binary moral terms (Khaleeli 2016) and that shrinks the borders of “the people” so as to leave out certain groups. Efe Peker’s article in this issue, for instance, demonstrates this in the specific case of India by analysing how Hinduism is adopted and articulated by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in equating “the people” to the Hindu majority. Similarly, Shanon Shah’s analysis interrogates this topic via the question of whether a multi-ethnic, multi-religious nation of Malaysians is possible. Along the same lines, Zeynep Yanaşmayan, Ayşen Üstübcü and Zeynep Kaşlı demonstrate how co-religiosity has not made it easier, at the societal level, for Syrian refugees to be considered a part of “the people” in Turkey.

Populist discourse that brings together different actors with varying interests against a common “enemy” is one of the crucial tools in

this process. This particular populist logic works by “formulating demands, rather than a set of demands” (De Cleen and Galanopolous 2016). Through the creation of a “chain of equivalence” (Laclau 2005), populist discourse speaks for “the people” and in the name of “the people,” claiming back the “nation” for those to whom it belongs. In other words, its primary claim is one of reparation—enabling a corrective of power inequalities and injustices. This is apparent in Shah’s discussion of how a focus on economic inequality and corruption was able to bring together diverse societal sectors in Malaysia, leading the alliance of opposition actors to win against the incumbent political alliance in the 2018 election.

Unsurprisingly, populist discourse is often accompanied by narratives of victimhood that juxtaposes “the oppressed” against “the oppressor” in both moral and affective terms. As such, it can portray minorities and marginalized groups as “enemies” of the nation, as has been seen with a range of populist right wing parties in Europe since the 1990s (Berezin 2007, Mudde 2004, Učeň 2007), the populist appeals of both the Democrat and Republican Parties in the U.S. (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016), and with “Chavismo” versus “opposition” in Venezuela (Samet 2013). Such portrayal is possible mainly because of the ambiguity of the very term “the people.” As Brubaker (2019: 13) reminds us “populist claims-making is located at the juncture of the *politics of inequality* and the *politics of identity*” (original emphasis). Yanasmayan et al. draw attention to this juncture in their discussion of migration debates in Turkey by the incumbent and opposition parties.

Populism, in a way, “presents [a] rupture with an existing order” but also “introduces ‘ordering’ where there is basic dislocation” (Laclau 2005:122). This duality opens up many possibilities in terms of the extent to which such populist logic continues to prevail in the political system (see, for instance, Pappas 2014). In other words, the deployment of populist discourse for strategic purposes might not necessarily imply that such discourse will continue once a populist

party is in power (Bonikowski 2016), if it manages to come into power, that is. Articles by Toygar Sinan Baykan, Peker, and Yanaşmayan et al. explore cases where political parties continue to deploy a populist discourse once they come into power. Such continuation arguably facilitates further consolidation of power by the ruling political party. During this process, populist discourse remains unstable, as the parameters of the “common enemy” change depending on the shifts in alliances among political actors.

This second phase of populist rule and power maintenance is rather different than the deployment of populist discourse to come into political power, as, in the former, the struggle over state institutions and over who or what represents the people often overlap. In this second phase, the struggle for institutions is essentially over, as populists already control them. Political parties risk becoming the state itself, forcing an illiberal and even authoritarian departure from electoral democracy. Ultimately, this process might be tantamount to the formation of a partisan bureaucracy, as well as a partisan base, founded on an allegiance to the ruling political party and political leader. In order to retain power, incumbent populists often resort to utilizing additional tools as populist discourse by itself does not suffice to maintain power. Building patronage networks is, for instance, a commonly used strategy by ruling populists. In his article on the role of intralite factionalism in the growth of populism in Turkey, Baykan demonstrates the vitality of such networks for the continuation of the incumbent Justice and Development Party (JDP) rule.

Interestingly, the definition of “the people” keeps changing throughout this phase, contingent on the political aims, needs and tactics of the populist actors. It is, thus, also arguably the phase when the boundaries between populism and nationalism (of various sorts) might get increasingly blurred, reproducing existing stereotypes and value judgments that solidify divisions among fellow nationals*. Although populism

and nationalism often get conflated in literature, De Cleen (2017) suggests that they differ from each other in that populism locates membership in “the people” on a vertical axis, putting emphasis on the dichotomy between “the elites” (upper strata) and “the people” (lower strata). Nationalism, on the other hand, locates membership in the nation on a horizontal axis, putting emphasis on the dichotomy between “fellow nationals” (in the nation) and foreigners (outside the nation). Yet, despite this difference, Brubaker argues (2019), the two are analytically dependent on each other and they usually intersect to produce an exclusionary image of “the nation” narrowed down to “the people,” as envisaged by populist actors. Shah, for instance, demonstrates this via his discussion on how ethnoreligious nationalism characterizing the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition have surfaced in the form of “morality” during the Pakatan Harapan (PH) rule, motivating the reactions from within the newly elected PH government to the LGBT+ controversies. This emphasis on the friction within the ruling bloc about the LGBT+ community helps highlight both the question of what happens when populist actors come into power and how the intersection of populism and ethnoreligious nationalism impacts who is included in “the people.”

An overview of the articles

The four articles featured in this special issue all focus, in varying ways, on the questions of how populist actors construct “the people,” how they establish and maintain their rule, and how social cleavages and historical diversity impact this process. Going beyond the discursive and stylistic emphasis that currently prevails within the scholarship on populism, Toygar Sinan Baykan reminds us of the focus early populism scholars had on “the cross-class/group appeals and the coalitions upon which the populist movements, parties and leaders relied.” Under that rubric, he invites us to think about the relationship between upper-classes and populist leaders and

* Note that the reproduction of existing stereotypes to bring about further polarization in the society is

not particular only to the second phase; it might, and does, occur in the first phase as well.

parties—an area that is often overlooked in the literature.

In the specific case of Turkey, Baykan argues, the support from within the bourgeoisie for the ruling JDP cannot be understood without an analysis of differentiation within the business elites along cultural and political lines—the secular, urban first generation bourgeoisie vs. the conservative, rural second generation—a differentiation the roots of which lie in the social cleavages that have been in place since early Republican times. Through a historical tracing of how two main factions within the bourgeoisie emerged and evolved, Baykan demonstrates that the JDP was able to deepen its patronage networks by incorporating “the underdog business faction” that has rapidly accumulated financial capital and influence, while lacking cultural capital.

With a similar emphasis on the need to focus on networks and historical cleavages, Efe Peker traces the intersection of populism with religion through a case study of India under the rule of Narendra Modi’s BJP. In exploring how Hinduism is articulated by the BJP as “part of a national-populist programme in India,” Peker takes populism beyond a mere focus on discourse. Employing a theoretical framework that builds on social movements studies he looks into the means and temporality of how BJP mobilized masses and underlines the vitality of two factors: First, a discursive construction of “the pure Hindu people” against the “corrupt secular elites” and against “non-Hindu enemies”; second, the existence of a historically-established network of grassroots *Hindutva* organizations, namely the Sangh Parivar, headed by Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the BJP’s parent organization. Increasing communal polarization, especially since the 1980s, plays a catalysing role, in Peker’s narrative, not only in normalizing the BJP’s ethno-religious rhetoric but also in its ability to increase its popular support. However, were it not for the charisma of Modi, Peker argues, *Hindutva* would perhaps have not reached “its most forceful populist moment.” Overall, Peker’s adoption of

a social movements approach in analysing how religion is articulated as a majoritarian tool in BJP’s populism allows him to surface the role of grassroots dynamics and historical processes in not only populist actors’ rise to power but also in the ways in which they maintain that power.

The third article by Zeynep Yanaşmayan, Ayşen Üstübici and Zeynep Kaşlı also focuses attention on a case where populists continue to deploy populist discourse, as well as existing social cleavages, after they come into power, i.e. Turkey. Through an overview of immigration debates in party programs, parliamentary proceedings and public statements by presidential candidates between 2014 and 2018, Yanaşmayan et al. demonstrate that the ruling JDP has established a hegemonic civilizationist populist discourse that welcomes refugees from Syria on the basis of religious (Muslim) brotherhood and neo-Ottomanist aspirations. Opposition parties criticize the JDP’s policies towards refugees mainly as a foreign policy issue, on the one hand, and they at times posit refugees as economic and social threats to the well-being of Turkish citizens, on the other hand. Yet, they also affirm JDP’s moral superiority claim against the “anti-immigrant West.” Overall, the domination of the JDP’s civilizationist populist rhetoric about 3,5 million refugees who currently reside in Turkey leaves almost no space for a rights-based approach. These empirical findings confirm those within the literature that a dominant anti-immigrant discourse, as prevalent in the West, has no relation to the actual number of migrants in a country. Moreover, their emphasis on the JDP’s selective definition of “the people,” based only on religious identity, and the articulation, at the societal level, of an alternative definition, based on ethnic identity, draws attention to the importance of exploring migration debates in places of high ethnic and religious diversity.

With a similar focus on the role of morality in party politics, Shanon Shah looks at the ways in which populism as a form of moral politics played an effective role in the electoral defeat of Malaysia’s authoritarian government in the 2018

elections. Shah argues that the opposition alliance PH, which includes a wide array of societal sectors, was able to win against the incumbent BN by mobilizing a diverse body of constituencies on the basis of economic grievances. PH's strategy to represent the corruption scandal that involved the state-created sovereign wealth fund—1MDB—as a moral deficit of the ruling elites, Shah argues, was influential to weaken the appeal of BN's simultaneous (and perhaps also contradictory) commitments to economic development, supremacy of Islam and Malaysia's multicultural heritage. However, the successful deployment by the PH of a populist rhetoric to win the election, catalysed by an increasing splintering within the ruling bloc, might not necessarily amount to, Shah urges us, the institutionalization of an inclusive politics. The most recent controversies around LGBT+ rights demonstrate the salience of fault-lines within the PH and a lack of internal consensus concerning the exclusionary ethno-religious nationalism prevalent in the country.

Overall, the articles in this special issue take a step forward in understanding how existing societal cleavages influence the workings of populism and vice versa, especially in historically-diverse societies. A historically-constituted ethno-religious understanding of the "people" often makes it easier for populist actors to mobilize masses against internal "enemies," as Peker shows in the case of India. In addition to helping populists gain power, mobilization of ethno-religious cleavages can also trigger internal conflicts and factions once populist actors are in power, as Shah demonstrates in the case of Malaysia. The Turkish case, on the other hand, showcases, as demonstrated by Yavaşmıyan et al. and Baykan, the ways in which religious, ethnic and class cleavages can intertwine with one another in populist mobilization.

Even though research on populism has lately proliferated with numerous scholars producing an invaluable body of work on the topic to better understand increasing democratic de-consolidation and polarization around the globe, we still

know very little on the relationship between societal cleavages and populism. In putting together this special issue, our aim has been to address this question by drawing attention to how populism works under the shadow of dissonant diversities and fragmented politics. We believe that the four articles featured in this issue, and their focus on the different aspects of this process in Turkey, Malaysia, and India, all serve to fulfil this aim. We hope that future research will complement our endeavour with a comparative focus on other countries with similar characteristics.

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