Populism as an Essentially Contested Concept or: On the Dangers of Centrism

Three years into his term, hardly anyone would call the French president successful, I guess. Back in 2017, however, Emmanuel Macron's election was met with great expectations, bordering on enthusiasm, by many commentators. It was perceived as a token of hope, because it was said to prove that it was possible to defeat populism. I found this rather puzzling. As many others, I was relieved that Marine Le Pen was unable to rally more than a third of the electorate behind her chauvinist programme, but was it really an achievement to beat her? Could not virtually anyone have done? Moreover, what was it supposed to mean, that Macron defeated populism?

Of course, Le Pen exemplifies what is commonly known as "populist rhetoric". Typical elements easily recognized are: The promise to change the game of ordinary party politics; staging as the leader of a movement, and as the voice of the common sense of ordinary people; exploiting prejudice; and not least, standing up against what is described as imminent dangers to the national interest and wellbeing of the people.[1] Now, the obvious differences between their programmes should not make us blind for the striking similarities between the contestants. Macron, as well, promised a new beginning; staged himself as leader of a movement, and as the voice of common sense; he too exploited prejudice and purported to stand up against an imminent danger to the interests and well-being of the nation. The difference, of course, is that the "common sense" that he appealed to, was the general worldview of the educated, urban middle classes, whose most deep-rooted prejudice is the belief that they themselves are unprejudiced. Of course, the imminent danger to the nation, as perceived by the followers of Macron, was not immigrants or Muslims, but the populists – and notably, not only on the right wing.

1. Populism as a polemical concept

The term "populism" is most often used polemically, and notably as a pejorative term, denoting an actual or potential threat to democracy. Projecting all problems and challenges to democracy into the image of the populist danger, is a key feature of "centrism" as a mirror image of populism. On the other hand, blaming the liberal mainstream for all problems and frustrations is a key feature of "populism" as a mirror image of centrism. In this way, politics seems like a house of mirrors – where, as we know, it may be difficult to tell left from right.[2]

Preliminary, we may distinguish between "populist rhetoric" and "the rhetoric of populism": On the level of "populist rhetoric", we have the polemical use of (positive) references to "the people" – as in speaking for the people, in the name of common sense, defending the people, mobilizing the people, and so on. What I call "the rhetoric of populism", work on a different level, where we encounter the polemical use of (negative) references to "populism" – as in

attacking “populists” and “populist rhetoric” in the name of reason. “Populism” is sometimes regarded as a symptom, sometimes as the illness itself – but in any case as a problem. This is why the widespread and recurring “rhetoric of populism” is so problematic, in my view.

My concern here is not with strategic communication, so I restrict myself to few words on why I would not recommend the “rhetoric of populism” as an important ingredient in political communication. Most obviously, it is merely reactive – the opponent will keep the initiative; it is negative – your own virtues stand out only in contrast the vices of your opponent; it stays on the surface –substantial debate over programmes are avoided.(Of course, this gamble may work, sometimes: Macron’s greatest asset in the second round of the 2017 elections was the fact that he was not Le Pen.) Last, not least, the rhetoric of populism has an unmistakable tinge of paternalism, of talking down to people. At the end of the day, this will only strengthen the appeal of straightforward populist rhetoric. Bluntly put, you will not enlighten anyone by calling him or her stupid. If someone, in your honest opinion, is prejudiced, misguided or in illusion, you should rather appeal to their capacity for thinking, and provide them with reasons and occasion for revising their opinions. However, the problem with the rhetoric of populism is more profound than the – very real – possibility of alienating voters by offending their intelligence.

There are, of course, good reason to be sceptical towards anyone proclaiming to be the “voice of the people” – but the rhetoric of populism tend to delegitimize *any* positive reference to “the people”. If speaking of “the people”, or even worse, *for* “the people”, becomes suspect in itself, it affects any attempt to give voice to popular concerns: The rhetoric of populism tend to discredit *any* defence of “the people” and *any* political mobilization in the name of “the people”. This is a profound problem, I think, for (at least) two, interrelated reasons: Firstly, important conceptual resources for the understanding of social and political dynamics are lost. Secondly, and even more severe, the concept of democracy itself becomes obscure. After all, the literal meaning of “democracy” is “rule of the people”. The term “populism” derive from “populus”, which is but the Latin word for “demos”.

2. Towards an analytic concept of populism

To address the first of these problems, I will give a very brief sketch of the concept of “populism” in recent theories of “radical democracy”. My main reference is the book *On Populist Reason*, published in 2005 by Argentinian-born political theorist Ernesto Laclau.[3] As I read it, the author attempt to establish “populism” as an analytical concept, intended to clarify the dynamics of social, cultural and political conflict. A basic assumption is that these

aspects are always interrelated, or, in Laclau's own usage, 'articulated' on each other. What we get, is a framework for interpreting movements that challenge domination. If applied in a value-neutral, descriptive manner, this works somewhat like a Weberian "ideal type". In addition, and in accordance with his own political commitments, the author attempt to do something more. Laclau is not presenting a political programme, but an enquiry into the conditions of possibility for left-wing populism. (*On Populist Reason* is thus a sequel to Laclau and Mouffe's earlier work on *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.[4]) For the present purposes, I restrict myself to paraphrasing the image of the dynamics of political mobilization offered, and notably in a different vocabulary. Here, the point of interest is not Laclau's theoretical approach as such, but the socio-political phenomena that it highlights; my argument is inspired by, but does not rest on Laclau's writings.

From time to time, everyone experience suffering, injustice, dissatisfaction – and most of the time, we endure; blame ourselves, bad luck, the way things are; or we cling to the belief that things will work out, eventually. Every now and then, patience reach its limit, however. We complain; demand something done, that something change. If this happen, life goes on. If not, our grievances may turn into frustrations of a second order; we blame those obstructing our attempts at relieving our situation. Our disappointment (or anger) may fuel demands for greater changes; we may question the competence or good will of the people in charge, or even institutions and power structures. We want to hold something or someone responsible – and most of the time, we leave it there, maybe clenching our fist in the pocket.

Sometimes, however, we become aware that we are not alone; others share our experiences, and we voice our claims together. As I understand Laclau, this is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for a social movement to begin. The crucial point is when a group constituted by a common demand becomes aware of groups with similar, but not identical, experiences and claims. Somehow, we come to perceive our claims as being of the same kind, directed at the same kind of adversaries. Different claims are linked, in what Laclau terms a "chain of equivalence". Taken together, these may challenge the legitimacy of the socio-political order, by questioning "hegemony", that is, the collective imagery ("culture" or "ideology") that provide legitimacy to the prevailing order.

Some of the motivation for the notion of "populist reason" is that such challenges to the power structures are typically expressed in terms of a conflict between "the people" and "those in power". In Laclau's words:

"A plurality of demands which, through their equivalential articulation, constitute a broader social subjectivity we will call *popular demands* – they start, at a very incipient level, to constitute the 'people' as a potential historical actor. We have already two clear

preconditions for populism: (1) the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating the 'people' from power; and (2) an equivalential articulation of demands making the emergence of the 'people' possible. There is a third precondition which does not really arise until the political mobilization has reached a higher level: the unification of these various demands – whose equivalence, up to that point, had not gone beyond a feeling of vague solidarity – into a stable system of signification."[5]

Now, the stability of a system of signification is always relative and precarious, and the vagueness and indeterminacy of the notions involved is necessary, and indeed an essential part of political dynamic, as Laclau describes it: "[V]agueness and indeterminacy are not shortcomings of a discourse *about* social reality, but, in some circumstances, inscribed in social reality as such".[6] Neither individuals nor groups exist as self-contained entities that *enter into* relations; rather, they become what they are *by and through* their relations. (This is what Laclau means by 'articulation'). To ascribe e.g. 'interests', 'identities', 'values' or 'aims' to individuals or groups is part and parcel of the process of signification through which these individuals and groups come to be at all.

Such processes are altogether rhetorical. The words and imagery that shape the perception and presentation of the parties, are part of the conflict, and shaped by the conflict. At the incipient level, even the definition of the situation is at stake: Are we dealing with disagreement within a given framework, or questioning the framework as such? In the first case, we encounter contended issues, or problems, approachable one by one, in the second, about conflict proper, where a number of different claims, taken together, come to signify social division. A series of different demands become a "chain" when some of them becomes placeholders for them all; this is how protesting groups become a movement.

An example from the history of the labour movement may be how the eight-hour working day became a slogan and a rallying point: Immediately, it was about conditions of work, but per implication, it was also about the conditions for political participation, family life, culture etc. More generally, the heyday of labour movements has been when they were genuinely populist – in the positive sense – that is, at times and places where "the working class" and its organisations – unions and parties – was widely perceived as the legitimate placeholder of "the people" – over against "the ruling classes".

Of course, you cannot conjure up constellations like that. However, we may draw some lessons.

(1) Popular discontent will sometimes inspire social movements; as political movements, they will typically take populist form. Under given circumstances they may effect profound

changes to society.

(2) Populist movements – i.e. broad, socio-political and cultural mobilizations in the name of "the people" against "those in power" – are vital to democracy, past and present. Without them, no processes of democratization in the past, and no productive confrontations on vital issues now and in the future.

(3) Political movements aiming at social change should be assessed on their political practice, i.e. what they aim at, and the means they employ. Bluntly put, the problem with right-wing populists is their right-wing policies, not their populism *per se*.

(4) The programmes and practices of *some* populist movements are indeed threatening the "agonistic pluralism" that is essential to democracy; however, this should not make us blind to other threats, notably those associated with the discrediting of any populist agenda.

3. Populism (and democracy) as contested concepts

My title allude to the notion of "Essentially Contested Concepts", which was introduced by the British philosopher W B Gallie in a talk at *The Aristotelian Society* in London in 1956 – quite far from current poststructuralist theories of "radical democracy".[7] In my view, however, it makes sense even in our context. His starting point is the observation that it is much easier to come to terms about questions of, say, the size and materials of a painting, than to agree on whether or not it should be regarded as a piece of art. That we do have different and even conflicting interpretations of it, is, according to Gallie, an essential feature of the concept of art itself. Furthermore, the elaboration of such conflicts, will indeed further our understanding – both of the concept and of art. His other examples of such essentially contested concepts include "christian doctrine", "social justice" and, most notably for our topic: "Democracy".

One of the features that make a notion belong to the class of essentially contested concepts, is that it denotes a complex phenomenon; one that may be described in different ways, highlighting different aspects as the most important ones. However, Gallie insist that the contestant conceptions is somehow perceived to refer to the same basic ideas – otherwise, we are simply dealing with ambiguity or "essentially *confused* concepts". Furthermore, these ideas seem to be "ideals" of sorts, or, as Gallie puts it, essentially contested concepts are "appreciative". Democracy is a contested concept because and as long as those who disagree over the interpretation of the concept and of what institutions, policies and practices deserve the name, at some level share the idea that democracy is something that should be pursued.

What then with “populism”? Maybe it is simply an essentially confused concept. Most certainly, it is not an “appreciative” concept, given the fact that it is often used pejoratively, denoting something negative, even dangerous. It is nevertheless, and this gets me to my conclusion – albeit a preliminary one – a concept that is essential to the conception of “Democracy” that I endorse. (Of course, I recognize that competing conceptions of democracy are possible.)

An essential feature of “democracy”, as I understand the concept, is that “the people” – the “demos” – is the basis of legitimacy for institutions and policies. This, however, does not imply that “democracy” has solved the problem of legitimacy. On the contrary, democracy imply that questions of legitimacy in principle are kept open to public contestation. Of course, some degree of institutional stability is generally desirable – but mainly as a framework for productive conflict and disagreement. Sometimes decisions have to be made and carried out, but legitimate policies should always be open to revision.

The word “democracy” involves a reference to “the people”. Moreover, the idea of democratic legitimacy refer to “the people” – and thus depend on the symbolic representation of “the people”, that is, on the words, images and social practices that shape the presentation and perception of “the people” and the relation between “the people” and “those in power”. According to the ideals of democracy, those in power should be representatives of the people. The reality of this is often questionable, however. Maybe we should question it, even more often and more profoundly than the usual business of politics allow. In times of crises, when the legitimacy of institutions and policies are at stake, profound conflicts over the symbolic representation of “the people” is bound to occur, in some form or another: What is a people? Who are the people? Who can legitimately claim to speak for the people? Whose claims, which attitudes and what commitments count – in fact and in principle – when we quarrel, fight and try to make decisions about the common good?

The mirror-house where “populist rhetoric” confront “the rhetoric of populism” is not the place to answer, or even pose these questions – because neither party recognize the problem. On the one hand, we have those who purport to have the answer – to know the identity of the people and of the enemy. On the other hand, we have those who dismiss the question – and thereby dissolve the democratic people, insisting that we are all individuals, that is, consumers and voters. In the realm of politics, voters are treated as consumers: Competition replace productive conflict and contestation. Spin and branding replace movements and parties.

Endnotes

[1] Cf Alberto Giordano: "Populism, Prejudice and the Rhetoric of Privilege", in *Nordicum-Mediterraneum*, vol 12, no. 3 https://nome.unak.is/wordpress/volume-12-no-3-2017/conference-proceeding-volume-12-no-3-2017/populism-prejudice-rhetoric-privilege/

[2] For a critical discussion of recent approaches to populism' in political theory, cf Yannis Stavrakakis and Anton Jäger: «Accomplishmens and limitations of the 'new' mainstream in contemporary populism studies», in: *European Journal of Social Theory*, 2018, vol 21(4) pp 547-565. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1368431017723337

[3] Ernesto Laclau:*On Populist Reason*, London/New York: Verso 2005.

[4] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe: *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* [1985], second edition, London/New York: Verso 2001.

[5] Laclau 2005, p 74.

[6] Ibid, p 67.

[7] Gallie, W. B. "Essentially Contested Concepts." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 56, 1955, pp. 167–198. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/4544562.

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