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Origins and Effects of Populism

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Abstract

A comment on Philippe Schmitter's Essay "The Vices and Virtues of 'Populisms' " (*Sociologica*, *13*(1), 2019).

Most concepts in social sciences suffer from the logic of circularity. Their definitions are shaped by the characteristics of phenomena that are commonly labeled by the respective term in the literature or in public discourse, and then, in the second phase of the circle, these abstract definitions are used to determine which empirically existing occurrences deserve the label. Even seemingly deductive approaches are informed by an intuitive, pre-definitional grouping of particular cases, whose features are synthesized into an 'ideal-type' and are used subsequently as a standard for judging empirical variations. This is spectacularly so in case of populism. Different authors have different historical movements, parties and personalities in mind when they draw the profile of 'the' populist, and therefore they are bound to arrive to different normative implications.

This makes it very difficult to evaluate certain definitions, or generic statements, about populism as right or wrong. All what a researcher can do is to note what is gained or lost if one goes down a particular road of definition and application.

Philippe Schmitter in the current essay emphasizes the heterogeneity of the movements commonly labeled as populist, but at the very same time promotes a powerful vision about the origins of populism, namely that 1. populism is initially a movement outside of party politics and that 2. it is "the product of a failure of the existing system of political parties to provide credible representation for 'neglected' groups of citizens" (Schmitter, 2019). The assumed virtues, such as the weakening of sclerotic partisan loyalties and the dissolution of collusive party systems, the mobilization of hitherto passive citizens, or the articulation of suppressed preferences, follow from this understanding of the origins of populism. The "vices," the growing instability of party politics, the rule of emotions instead of information-based rational calculus, the increased likelihood of irresponsible decisions, etc, are the mirror images of the virtues. Schmitter tends to weigh the virtues as more likely and relevant than the standard literature, but

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he underlines that populism can be both constructive or destructive, depending on the specific circumstances. Most importantly, he presents among the virtues the likely outcome that the populist parties will eventually fail and leave behind a "reinvigorated party system" but lists among the potential vices the consolidation of a new dictatorial regime. His 13 points that specify under which conditions will populism be less harmful, or even beneficial, for the society at large, strike me as insightful, precise and quasi-comprehensive.

But why should we accept Schmitter's starting assumptions, namely that populism originates in the society, it gradually politicizes, and that it constitutes a response to the failures of representative democracy in general, and the ruling political elites in particular? Why not to allow populism to originate in the political system, and even in the upper layers of the system?

In fact, populism, that is speaking on behalf of the people against a corrupt elite and demanding the sovereignty of the former, is an ideology or discourse or strategy (from the point of view of the current argument it doesn't matter which) that can be utilized also by established political figures, the (reactionary) supporters of at least some elements of the status quo, or by political novices whose only goal is to replace the incumbents. Actually, populism is a route that can be taken by seasoned professional politicians who simply want to secure reelection. While we should take populism seriously, we shouldn't understand it literally.

This has serious implications for the potential consequences. Schmitter, for example, mentions the anti-foreign power aspect of populism but doesn't consider the possibility that the conflict with "imperialist" powers may, in fact, serve the conservation of domestic structures.

Schmitter is right when he draws attention to the diversity of populists, but he underestimates the degree of diversity. Populism is an (ideological, discursive, etc.) toolkit, that can be used for various purposes. Its most fundamental element is its anti-liberalism: its intention and capacity to weaken the logic of checks and balances, the constitutional protection of minority interests and the culture of compromise. These can be useful features in systems in which there is too much liberalism. But how many such systems do we know?

References

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