

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Populisms and Gender Equality

Zoe Lefkofridi*

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Abstract

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

1 Studying Populism: From the Margins to the Mainstream

Once upon a time, populism was a phenomenon that concerned mainly scholars of democratization and regional experts of the global periphery (e.g. Latin America). Thanks to its increasing presence in the developed democratic world, its study gradually moved from the margins into the mainstream of scientific research. Populism is today at center stage not only in political science and sociology but also in history and communication studies; academic scholarship engages in defining populism conceptually, measuring it empirically and, ultimately, understanding its causes and its effects (for a comprehensive overview and outlook, see Heinisch, Holtz-Bacha, & Mazzoleni, 2017).

Schmitter (2019b) traces the origins of populism in the very failure of existing political parties to provide credible representation for "neglected" groups of citizens. In this view, populism is a response to a crisis of representation and legitimacy "that established institutions, mainstream political actors and the business of politics as usual have encountered" (Heinisch, Holtz-Bacha, & Mazzoleni, 2017, p. 5). Indeed, party democracy "as we know it" is challenged by processes of globalization and regional integration. In the European Union (EU), there is a growing tension between governing in a prudent and consistent manner, following accepted procedural norms and practices (*responsibility*) and parties' capacities to respond to voters' demands (*responsiveness*) (Karremans & Lefkofridi, 2019; Mair, 2013, 2014). This became obvious following the 2008 financial crisis, which generated sovereign debt crises in several Eurozone members and a crisis in the currency zone as a whole: as governing parties were struggling to manage the gap between their governing and representative roles, populist challengers claimed citizens' expression and representation (Lefkofridi & Nezi, 2019; Mair, 2013, 2014; Kriesi, 2014). If, however, we

* Department of Political Science, University of Salzburg (Austria); ✉ zoe.lefkofridi@sbg.ac.at;  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5696-3979>

approach populism as the product of the crisis of “democracy as we know it,” the question is whether it is benevolent or malicious.

The broad debates on populism have not shied away from this important question. Yet, populism remains a contested concept, and so does its (assumed) relationship with democracy. While for some scholars populism is the opposite of democracy (Urbinati, 1998) or synonymous with democratic illiberalism (Pappas, 2019), for others populism can be democracy’s friend (Tännsjö, 1992). Against this background, Philippe C. Schmitter (2019b) offers an optimistic reading of contemporary populism, which highlights its vices along with its virtues, thus taking a neutral position vis-à-vis its potential effects. It depends, Schmitter (2019a) warns us, stressing that failures of real existing democracies are due to both endogenous and exogenous factors. In other words, populism is the product not just of dysfunctional political institutions, but of the broader environment, where these are embedded. Hence, there is not just one populism but many. Indeed, the region where Philippe Schmitter’s research endeavors began, Latin America — is a region where populism has a long tradition. Though for a long time at the margins of European politics, populism has been at the centre of political change in Latin American history; so when European scholars started studying a phenomenon they thought was novel, Latin American scholars were already talking about “waves of populism”¹ (Heinisch, Holtz-Bacha, & Mazzoleni, 2017; Kampwirth, 2010a).

If we accept the premise that populism comes in many flavors, it follows that its effects are likely to be variable. The key question thus concerns the conditions under which its virtues may prevail over its vices. In this regard, Schmitter’s (2019b) list of conditions helps advance the debate on populism with a series of propositions. Though most of them are awaiting for empirical tests, a few have been empirically explored. Recent empirical inquiries show, for instance, how contextual factors (e.g. democratic consolidation of a country) but also party-specific factors, such as party ideology (left vs. right) and party status (government vs. opposition) moderate the relationship between populism and democracy (Huber & Ruth, 2017; Huber & Schimpf, 2017a, 2017b; Huber & Schimpf, 2016a, 2016b). Indeed, populism can function as a corrective when populist parties are in opposition. As a byproduct of their political endeavors, populist actors can bring forward important but neglected issues and represent disenfranchised segments of society. At the same time, their Manichean world-view, in combination with strong anti-elitism directly confronts central pillars of liberal democracy; it is contradictory to the compromise-driven liberal democracy that protects minorities and limits the power of the executive (Plattner, 2010).

Schmitter’s (2019b) systematic treatise of populism can serve as the basis to advance knowledge of populisms, and their effects. Some of his propositions, such as those concerning the roles played by the international context, the internal structures of party organizations, or the personal qualities of populist leaders, have thus far received little scholarly attention. By highlighting factors at different levels of analysis, Schmitter inspires us to think of whether, how and why populism can be benevolent or malicious for specific goals of contemporary European democracies. One such goal is gender² equality, which concerns equal rights and opportunities for women and men across all sectors of society, such as decision making and economic participation. Gender equality is a goal not only enshrined in national constitutions of European democracies but it also makes part of the EU *acquis communautaire*; and it is also a goal promoted by many international organizations, such as the United Nations (UN) and the Organization for Cooperation and Development in Europe (OECD).

2 Studying Populism: From the Mainstream to the Margins

The relationship of populism and gender equality is an issue that has been largely neglected by the abundant literature on populists’ electoral success, their organizations and their impact on political discourse, public policy, party systems, as well as democracy more broadly. This is because the gendered nature of

1. Research on Latin America distinguishes between classic populism (left-wing, redistributive); neo-populism (neo-liberalist) and radical populism (left-wing, against neo-liberalism but with fewer resources than classic populism).
2. While ‘sex’ connotes biological differences between men and women, ‘gender’ refers to men’s and women’s behavioral, social, and psychological characteristics, and their socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes within a cultural and social context (Nirel, 2017).

politics (and of the discipline that studies it) have for a long time been ignored by mainstream political science and comparative politics in particular (Celis et al., 2013; Beckwith, 2010).

To what extent can populisms harm or help gender equality? To date, analyses addressing the relationship between populism and gender remain scarce (Kantola & Lombardo, 2019; Dingler, Lefkofridi, & Marent, 2017; Nirel, 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015); as a result, the virtues and vices of populism for gender equality remain largely underdeveloped theoretically and empirically. To contribute to this nascent debate, this essay revisits some of Schmitter's (2019b) ideas from the perspective of gender equality, which is the ultimate goal of feminist politics.³ Though the relationship of populism to gender is multidimensional (Kantola & Lombardo, 2019; Dingler, Lefkofridi, & Marent, 2017), here I briefly discuss the core elements of populism included in Schmitter's (2019b) definition: the mobilization of the excluded groups, the bundling together of heterogeneous issues and the focus on personality.

Schmitter (2019b) provides us with a precise, composite definition of populism, which helps us explore the relationship of populism to feminist politics and the promotion of gender equality more broadly. Schmitter's composite definition visualizes populism as:

- a *process* of mobilization and expression of alienated citizens that forms into a social movement or personal following, which (eventually) transforms into a political party competing in elections to get political power using
- an opportunistic *strategy* of bundling together “transversal” or “nascent” policy issues “into a dichotomous vision of political conflict, between a virtuous ‘people,’ who share these interests and passions and an obstructive, if not perverse ‘elite’ that does not”; due to the “heterogeneous nature of this packaging process the populist party relies heavily upon
- the *personality* of its leader or leaders, “who claim a unique capability for resolving objectives previously believed to be unattainable, incompatible or excluded.”

The quest for the transformation of unequal gender relations through the empowerment of the marginalized majority of the world's population, women, naturally relates to the first part of the definition provided by Schmitter: populism as a process of mobilization of the disenfranchised and deprived citizens. If women are understood as part of the marginalized, formerly excluded social groups, populists are likely to try to mobilize them, and this process of mobilization might have unintended consequences. For instance, though neither right nor left populists in Latin America intended to advance a truly ‘progressive’ gender agenda, they did open up opportunities for women to respond to their political exclusion. Women's emancipation often came as a side effect of populist politics and policies (Kampwirth, 2010a).

Even if populists do not challenge conventional gender models, they do try to mobilize women as disenfranchised and deprived people; yet how is gender instrumentalized, and the inherent tensions in populist ideology and discourse matter for the extent to which a transformation of gender unequal relations is promoted, or not. The second and third components of Schmitter's definition, namely opportunism and personality, alert us to potential distortions in the promotion of gender equality by and through populist parties.

2.1 Opportunism and Gender Relations

To what extent do populisms, which raise and combine disparate and/or ignored political issues, encourage the articulation of suppressed expectations about gender equality? As a strategy based on opportunism, populism politicizes neglected gender issues in a polarizing manner. Schmitter (2019b) underlines that the “repackaging” of heterogeneous issues occurs in a dichotomous frame of people vs. elite.

3. Gender equality obviously relates to feminism; but given that, similarly to populism, there is not one, but several feminisms (Dhamoon, 2013), we focus here on the relationship between populism and gender equality as the ultimate goal of ‘feminist politics.’ Feminist politics, in turn concerns the actions aiming at transforming unequal gendered power relations, norms and practices (Ferree, 2006; see also Kantola & Lombardo, 2019).

Hence, the question of whether populists' challenging of the status quo will translate into the promotion of gender equality depends upon how gender equality corresponds to the Manichean division between 'the people' and/or 'the elite.'

Like the concept of populism, the concept of gender also concerns a dichotomy (men and women); but while the concept of gender highlights diversity within the "people," populism tries to silence it (Nirel, 2017). To explicate, based on a homogeneous interpretation of the notion of people, populist parties are unlikely to differentiate between genders and devote particular attention to any of them. Alternatively, populists might perceive gender equality as part and parcel of an educated, privileged, feminist elite that they fundamentally oppose (e.g. Hillary Clinton in the U.S.).

Yet, populists do not only condemn the national elite as the source of the people's problems. Schmitter (2019b) highlights that populisms challenge "accepted" external constraints and question existing and often exploitive dependencies upon foreign powers. At the same time, populisms may also use foreigners and foreign powers as scapegoats for their own failings and weaken external linkages necessary for national welfare and security (Schmitter, 2019b). In populist discourse, foreigners and foreign powers can relate to gender in complex ways.

In Latin America, left populist Bolivian President Evo Morales (Movimiento al Socialismo/MAS, 2006) uses a strong anti-colonial tone, whereby gender inequality becomes a means with which to blame Bolivia's social problems on colonial influences (Rousseau, 2010). Though Morales refers to women as symbols of motherhood, affection and honesty as well as family unity — in the Catholic sense of being self-sacrificing for the sake of the family, Machismo (and consequently gender inequality) are considered foreign to Andean culture and 'imported' from the imperialists (ibid.) — similarly to European radical right populists that warn against Muslims importing gender inequality.

Though the European populist radical right has not engaged in the promotion of gender equality it has paid increasing attention to gender issues in a context of an anti-immigrant and islamophobic discourse that emphasizes the alleged (in)compatibility of Islam with Christian societies (Hafez, 2014; Meret & Siim, 2012; Irvine & Lilly, 2007). Religious practices (e.g. headscarves) are condemned as discriminating against women, Muslim men are portrayed as oppressors, and (European) women are thus in need of protection from Muslim men, who lack respect for their rights and liberties (Mayer, Ajanovic, & Sauer, 2014; Akkerman & Hagelund, 2007). In the words of Nicole Höchst, a member of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), her party is "*the only party in Germany who is really fighting for women's rights, because we point out we're in danger of losing the freedoms and rights of women for which we've fought for centuries*" (Chrisafis, Connolly, & Giuffrida, 2019). Women's freedom and liberal rights are bundled together with Christian values and traditional views of women. In this context, Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán stands against an EU that is, in his view, unable to "protect Christian values" and contain the migration crisis that started in the Summer 2015; similarly, other radical right populist leaders, like French Marine Le Pen and Italian Matteo Salvini, have been trying to unite and create an anti-migration and anti-Islamic political movement to "save Europe." In this way, European radical right populist parties pose as protectors of women against Muslim migrants but also against the EU, which poses external constraints and wants to 'force' the "people" to share responsibility over "culturally incompatible" refugees with their EU partners at the Union's borders.

Most European radical right populists support large families, oppose abortion and same-sex marriage (Akkerman, 2015) and generally view women in a traditional role, as someone in need of protection. A similar family model, underpinned by unequal gender norms in terms of economic participation (i.e. women are homemakers and men are breadwinners) was deeply inculcated in the early left populisms of Latin America. The classic leftist populism challenged neither machismo nor the status quo of gender inequality and had little to do with feminists, who, according to Eva Perón, belonged to "another race of women" (Grammático, 2010, p. 128). Despite assigning women the role of crucial agents of social change and popular mobilization, Latin American left populism did so by hailing them as mothers. Ultimately, conventional models of gender relations carried on into the new millennium and contemporary Latin American left populists' gender discourse remains inconsistent, though it is now tied to different frames (anti-colonialism).

The gender norms promoted by the contemporary European radical right populism and Latin American left populism stand in sharp contrast to the stance towards gender equality articulated by European

left populist parties, such as Spanish Podemos, Greek SYRIZA or German Die Linke. For instance, Kantola & Lombardo (2019) find that gender equality, albeit not a priority, was on the agenda of Podemos: the party promoted women's empowerment both within the party (statutes, references to feminism) and in Spanish society more broadly (gender equality proposals). We should keep in mind that compared to Latin American left populist parties, European ones operate in the much more liberal context of the EU, which has also brought significant progress vis-à-vis gender relations. Though European left populist parties also criticize the EU as generating external constraints that undermine the power of the people, but they do so for very different reasons (socioeconomic) than the European radical right populists (sociocultural). For European left populism, skepticism towards the EU concerns the dismantling of (national) welfare states, which they consider a key prerequisite for gender equal economic participation.

2.2 Leader's Personality and Gender Relations

Schmitter (2019b) points out that populisms shift the focus on the personality of their leaders, and away from issues and policies and obsolete party programs and ideologies. Populisms' reliance on the personality of the leading figure makes them particularly interesting for gender research.

On the one hand, if leadership is highly individualistic, gender models and the kind of discursive frame promoted by populist parties may be strongly dependent upon the views of a single person, and how she or he relates to gender. This has consequences for the promotion of gender equality by populist parties. In her study of Nicaraguan Sandinistas under Ortega, Kampwirth (2010b, pp. 163–164) argues that the connection of an agenda of social justice and social change to one individual (populist leadership) may undermine feminist gains for two reasons: first, the agenda narrows as the leadership of the movement moves from being more collective to more individualistic; second, the shift from collective revolutionary leadership to individual leadership of one person and his immediate family results in the fate of women becoming dependent upon the views of that one person.

On the other hand, if populism concerns the politics of personality, then it has always been about gender and specific models of masculinity and femininity (Kampwirth, 2010a, p. 1). Thus, gender may feature among the key characteristics of the populist actor in the sense that specific gender models may facilitate or hinder the conversion of non-political capital into political capital (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2017). In patriarchal societies, as is the case in Latin America, the presumption that men are better leaders is not surprising. Coniff's (2010) research on Brazil indicates that when discussing populist leadership, ordinary individuals made family analogies in which the president (for example, Vargas) was represented as the father figure of the country and the citizens as his children. Besides the father figure, other models used by populist leaders in their campaigns include, among others, the athlete, the military man, the Catholic priest or even Jesus Christ himself, who comes to 'save' the people (Kampwirth, 2010a, p. 10).

In gender equal Scandinavia, one of the scarce in-depth studies in this field (Meret, 2015) concerns Pia Kjærsgaard, who headed the Danish right-wing People's Party from 1995 to 2012. Though her populist style and rhetoric did not seem to differ significantly from those of her past or contemporary male colleagues, some female gendered elements were clearly overemphasized and often reproduced both in the party literature, in official and non-official biographies and in the mainstream press. On the one hand, she displays a "professional, hard core and despotic leadership" in the public political sphere; on the other hand, she shows a "motherly, ordinary, over-emotional and straightforward" image of the 'private Pia' — both a woman and a mother (Meret, 2015, pp. 101). This last gendered construct aimed at compensating for her authoritarian, bureaucratic and, in some cases, tyrannical leadership style (*Ibid.*).

3 Populism and Gender Equality: A Vicious or Virtuous Relationship?

Are populisms likely to be virtuous or vicious for gender equality? It depends, since specific gender equality-related issues selected by populists are likely to vary across ideological camps. In their competition against other parties, populists on the right and left are likely to tie gender to the issue frames in which they have a good reputation. For instance, parties on the right are likely to link it to immigration, security, tradition and culture, while parties on the left are likely to connect it to social change, social

justice and inclusion. These choices are likely to be context-dependent, given country differences in levels of gender equality and in broader policy domains that affect women, for instance, the economy (e.g. compare Latin American and European left populism). The kind of issues populists will choose to emphasize may, in turn, impact on populists' appeal to women or repel them as voters. Hence, populists' relationships with gender equality are likely to vary according to differences in opportunity structures — what Heinisch & Mazzoleni (2017) label as “exogenous conditions” (societal and cultural change, institutional conditions, and so on). Hence, variation can manifest itself both within a country (or a region with similar characteristics, for example, Scandinavia) over time, and across countries (or regions).

To understand how populisms can affect gender relations, we need to also reflect on women's fitness to the role of the populist leader. The question concerns the ways female populist leaders are perceived by their party base, the general public and the press; and whether they are judged differently compared to their male counterparts. Populisms' focus on leaders' personality is important because women have a much harder time getting leadership roles (not only in politics but also in business), and when they do, they are often harshly judged for their performance. This is because, based on gender stereotypes, they are assumed to be compassionate and soft, while leadership requires ‘toughness.’ This has two consequences: first, women are assumed to be less fit for leadership; second, if women are tough leaders, they are judged harshly because they do not conform to the gender stereotype, which expects them to be gentle and kind. To be successful, female leaders — and populist female leaders even more so — have to constantly find a balance between images of masculinity and femininity. Research should thus pay more attention to the models of gender relations and images of femininity and masculinity constructed and practiced by party leaders. The field would greatly benefit from comparisons between female populists (for example, Marine Le Pen and Siv Jensen) and with their male counterparts given that their leadership styles and gendered representations seem to have significantly contributed to the profiling of populist parties (Meret, 2015, p. 102).

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Zoe Lefkofridi: Department of Political Science, University of Salzburg (Austria)

📧 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5696-3979>

✉ zoe.lefkofridi@sbg.ac.at; 🌐 <http://www.mwpweb.eu/ZoeLefkofridi/>

Zoe Lefkofridi is Associate Professor of Comparative Politics at the University of Salzburg, Austria. Her research interests lie in transnational democracy and political representation and inequality in Europe, and her work appears, inter alia, in the *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *European Union Politics*, *Politics and Gender*, *West European Politics* and Oxford University Press.