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Taggart, Paul (2018) *Populism and 'unpolitics'*. In: Fitzi, Gregor, Mackert, Juergen and Turner, Bryan (eds.) *Populism and the crisis of democracy*. Routledge Advances in Sociology, 1. Routledge, London, pp. 79-87. ISBN 9781138091368

## **Populism and 'unpolitics'**

*Paul Taggart*

### **Introduction**

There is now something of a consolidation in the study of populism. This is at a time when there is clear upsurge in populism as a political force across the world, from Europe, to Latin America, the USA and Asia. There is not full agreement on a definition, but the upsurge in the sheer volume of work on populism has come along with some more patterning of that work. One of the most dominant themes has been the consideration of populism as ideology (Taggart, 2000; Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). There is now an extensive body of scholarship, both conceptual and empirical, that uses populism as an ideology. While we have some convergence here, and it is a welcome convergence, the elements that make up that consensus have omitted and elided over the relationship of populism to politics.

This chapter argues that we need to re-insert a fuller sense of populism's relationship to politics into the definition of populism. To do this, I suggest that populism has, at its core, an implicit assertion of what I will term 'unpolitics'. And it is the confrontation of this unpolitics with the functioning of representative politics that makes populism so potent and so provocative to contemporary representative democracy.

This paper is structured in the following way. First I offer a literature review to try and back up the case that the element of politics has dropped out of the consideration of populism. The paper then offers a definition of unpolitics that contrasts it with other related concepts and then the paper considers three different implications of unpolitics for populism. This paper is designed as a think piece. It is consciously non-empirical in the sense of looking at particular instances of populism but I am attempting to make a (hesitant) wider point about how study populism in general.

### **Populism as Ideology**

It will be a relief to hear that this paper is not another that seeks to engage in the practice of definitions of populism but I do want to make three observations about what the definitional debate shows us. First I would say that Cas Mudde's (rightly) influential definition points us to the primary elements of populism and they are a series of concepts. According to Mudde,

populism is ‘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’ (Mudde, 2004: 543). The people-centredness is clearly there. And this aspect has had plenty of academic attention (Canovan, 2005; Stavrakakis, 2014; Ochoa, 2014). Similarly the opposition to elites is well established.

Politics for populists, is however reduced in this definition to being an expression of one of the most oblique concepts in Political Theory. However we can make this more accessible by seeing the importance of the general will as embodied in the populist emphasis on popular sovereignty (Canovan, 1999, 2004). This focus is really about populism as a feature of democracy rather than politics. Certainly it is true that populism emphasises popular sovereignty and the will of majority as an enabling component of democracy that has become constrained. Populism also plays up popular sovereignty but plays down the other features of democracy that emphasise constraint such as the rights and rule of law. So this emphasis is a good one and one that is a core feature of populism. It is also goes a long way to explaining why the manifestation of populism is so problematic for democracy, as it challenges it from within (Meny and Surel, 2002).

The weakness of this element of the definition is that it misses the more fundamental ambivalence about politics itself which populism derives from. It is from this ambivalence to politics that the corruption of Mudde’s ‘corrupt elites’ comes from. The elites are not inherently corrupt but rather are corrupted by being involved in politics. For populist thinking the steady state model is one where most citizens get on with their own lives and avoid politics and where those that are involved in politics will inherently be unrepresentative and will, more importantly, inevitably be corrupted by any sustained political activity. Simply asserting the general will is not enough to fully describe the populist sense of politics. And I would argue it goes deeper than this – it misses the unpolitics of populism.

The second observation is that populism can give rise to a series of secondary features. These are factors that are not universal. Not all populists demonstrate these features but they occur commonly enough for us to suggest that they have some association with populism. I am going to call these ‘tropes’. Ben Stanley has talked about the populist playbook and this is a very similar idea – that there are a set of resources that populists can and do call upon but which are chosen in response to a particular context so are not always mobilised. The thin-centredness of populism as an ideology explains why we have to be prepared to see populism as an ideology which may give rise to features that are symptomatic of its core elements but which are

themselves not necessary and sufficient for us to identify them as universal features of populism (Stanley, 2008; Taggart, 2000; Freedman, 2017).

The three core features of populism lie then in its people centredness, its antipathy towards elites and, I am suggesting here, a particular conception of politics which I am calling 'unpolitics'. The tropes can be considered secondary features of populism but all stem from unpolitics. But before we consider these, it is important to try to define and clarify what I mean by unpolitics.

### **Definition and differentiation of unpolitics**

Unpolitics is not the same as anti-politics or being apolitical. I am defining unpolitics here as the repudiation of politics as the process for resolving conflict. It is both negative in the sense of rejecting key elements of politics (settlements, corruption and conspiracies) but also positive in the sense of tending to celebrate or resort to other forms of activity (e.g. war, religion) but staying within a democratic frame of reference.

It is clearly not apolitical as populism can lead to the full engagement in politics. The only way in which it could potentially be seen as apolitical is in the idea that populists are only 'reluctantly' political – that unconventional populist leaders will often claim to be in politics as a temporary measure to fix a crisis. The narrative of populism does as one of its core features the idea that right-thinking, virtuous and ordinary people are those that it is appealing to and it is these sorts of people who are normally non-political. Politics is a degenerative activity and these people just normally like to get on with their lives, earn a living and avoid the political world. That is why the 'silent majority' is silent. It has chosen to not have a voice as it has chosen to not be political. However it is the emergence of a sense of crisis that mobilises this constituency to rise up and start to become engaged actively in politics (as populist actors) or active supporters of those actors engaged in politics (as a populist constituency).

Unpolitics is not the same as the rejection of politics or anti-politics. There are two points here. First that it is not anti-politics in the sense that anti-politics is revolutionary. Populism's power is in being with the realms of reformism and stopping short of revolution. It works within the boundaries of existing democratic politics. As soon as it steps outside those boundaries it comes to be authoritarian, revolutionary but most decidedly not populist. The second point that it is also not without politics or apolitical. At its core it may have a hankering for a world without politics but populism is driven to engagement with politics but in a way that is at odds with that politics. This is partly why populism is always so challenging a phenomenon for those that

are either systematically engaged in or engaged by politics as an activity. The disjuncture between unpolitics and politics is that make populism often so spectacular and so perplexing to students of politics.

### **The nature of populist tropes**

The three tropes that follow from unpolitics are features that often, but not always, are apparent in populism. I am admittedly being rather broad brush here and this is not an empirical survey of the presence of these tropes. Rather what I am seeking to do is to see if these broad brush strokes paint a picture of some of the more opaque aspects of populism.

### ***Politics as war***

In the classic von Clausewitz definition, 'War is the continuation of politics by other means' but what I want so suggest here is that for populists there is a strong undertone of politics being the continuation of war by other means. What I mean here is that the repudiation of politics by populists means that when they engage in political activity the tone, tools and metaphors that they adopt can have more in common with war than with the practice of politics. This also goes some way to explaining the appeal of populists to their constituencies even at times of apparent chaos and confusion.

The war metaphor for populists can be seen in three key ways. First, it can be seen in polarisation. The binary nature of politics for populists is frequently noted. For some this meant populism has been termed bifurcatory or as Manichean (Hawkins, 2010). It seems almost self-evident to suggest that there is something of a relationship between polarisation and the emergence of populism. But what is not as clear is whether polarisation is the cause or the effect of populism. The framing of politics by populists is more important as a cause than as an effect of polarisation.

The second implication of the war trope for populists is the neglect of rights. What is striking about populists is that the trenchant assertion that they are there to champion those who have been neglected and who are the majority is almost never cast in terms of rights. The war metaphor implies that the enemy are very much an enemy in everything. The elite are essentially to be opposed and these must be a complete defeat. For populism, the war trope justifies the suspension of rights, just as might be expected in the situation of states going to war.

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The emphasis for populism is on wars and not battles. Populism views politics as on-going conflict. It is for this reason that I am identifying a war and not a battle trope. For populists defeat in any one battle does not signify defeat. Indeed, populists can often claim that defeat is evidence of the superior resources of the enemy but this is itself vindication of the populist cause. It is almost the case that success and failure in elections can be equal grist to the populist will. Populism's power can be to use defeat as a source of effective mobilisation.

### ***Politics as religion***

To suggest a parallel between populism and religion is nothing novel. We can see it implicit in the work of Hawkins and explicit in the idea of missionary politics in Zuquete (2007). Historically, we can also see strong religious parallels in the early populists. The clearest case is of the Russian *narodniki* whose movement had all the elements of evangelising, conversion and proselyting that we might expect with a religious movement (Venturi, 1960).

In practice identifying a parallel with religion or a quasi-religious (Taggart, 2000) aspect to populism is rather vague. For those manifestations of populism without an explicit link to religion, then, we need to be clearer on *how* this putative link might manifest itself. I would suggest that there are three ways we can see this trope: in terms of charismatic leadership, in the emphasis on the virtue of the people and in a tendency to evangelise.

The first manifestation of the religious trope can be seen in that way that populism is often associated with or can itself celebrate charismatic leadership (see Taggart, 2000, 100-103; Barr 2009). There is sometimes a tendency to talk about populism as always being associated with charismatic leadership. We need to be precise here about the meaning of charisma and to take to mean something more than just personalistic leadership. The leadership of someone like Chavez is about not his personal qualities but also in him alone embodying the people. (The Trump case does not work well here). We need to go back to the Weberian idea of charismatic implying being touched by God. This idea means that authority attaches not to office or to tradition but to the individual alone.

Looking at examples of the contemporary populist radical right in Europe, there is certainly a strong association between powerful individual leaders and the parties that they lead (Van der Brug & Mughan 2007) and the same holds true for some Latin American cases (see Weyland 2003). But there is nothing inherent in populism that means it inevitably tends to charismatic leadership. Populists in the nineteenth century in the US and in Russia did not have charismatic

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leaders. They were both cases of bottom up mass movements without clear leaders. The religious parallel is instructive here. The idea from religion of a messiah or a prophet as sent by God is something that does not occur with regularity. With religion the importance of a God-given representation comes about only occasionally and the presence of such figures can imply the need to reinstate the virtue of the people, to move them back into a track that is more in accord with God. For populists, the charismatic leadership claim is very much that a sense of crisis (Taggart, 2000) brings about the need for extraordinary leadership. The unpolitics is clear in that often those individual extraordinary individuals come often from outside conventional politics. Businessmen and billionaires are more attractive to populists than established conventional politicians. The 'gift or grace' of such figures is that their extraordinariness is what enables them to lead, or to channel, the ordinariness of their constituency. Whether it is Berlusconi, Babis, Trump or Perot, populist leaders of this ilk flaunt their exceptionality as a paradoxical mark of their connection to the ordinariness of their constituency. And even when populist leaders are not from outside conventional politics, they often use the socio-cultural norms of the 'low' (Ostiguy, 2017) to ram home how they can transgress conventional political norms, even if they have not, in practice, crossed over into politics from 'outside'.

The second way we can see the religious parallel is in the virtue of the people. As Shils (1956) observed an aspect of populism is the inversion of virtue: virtue coming not from detachment or from learning or study, but rather virtue is inherent within the people. In a sense then, the populist narrative of a virtuous people is a parallel for the people as being blessed. The reason that populists eschew experts, theories and intellectuals is that wisdom does not come from learning or from books. Rather it comes from ordinariness and innocence. There are strong religious parallels with the idea either of a 'chosen people' or in the idea that we are all God's children.

The third aspect of populism that can link with its religious parallel is the tendency to evangelise. Think here of the co-operative movements that underlay the US populists in the 1870s and 1880s (Goodwyn, 1976). There was a strong element of education as these farmers sought to spread ideas about how they might operate collectively to overcome the atomisation and powerlessness that they felt in the face of money, political and railroad interests. And we see that idea of spreading truth also important in the *narodniki*. There was, in both movements a strong theme of learning. For the US populists, the co-operative movement placed a great emphasis on spreading its message through teaching and instruction. This was linked to learning about how to operate as a collective agrarian enterprise to free the farmers from their

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dependence on the banks and railroads. But it inevitably spilled into teaching and learning about politics (Goodwyn, 1976).

### **Politics as conspiracy theory**

The third trope that we can identify in populism is in the tendency towards conspiracy theory. The assertion here is that populists will often tend towards a diagnosis of the present condition that verges on, or is characterised by, being a conspiracy theory (Castanho Silva, Vegetti and Littvay, 2017). This stems from the propensity to see the elite as corrupt and conspiratorial and as unrepresentative of the people. The prevalence of this situation then implies that there is agency at work – that it is a design.

The key elements of a conspiracy theory are that power is being wielded by the powerful in a collusive way with a deliberate element of secrecy (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). As Fenster (1999) notes, conspiracy theories are theories of power and so they are more than casual empirical assertions. This means that the populist resort to conspiracy theories is more fundamental than a claim about a case. It also amounts to a claim about politics. It may be about politics at national level but it also may feed into wider global conspiracies.

Conspiracy theories simplify complexity. They provide an over-arching explanation for what might be difficult or even impossible to otherwise fully explain. It may be that politics is conducted via the active collusion of the powerful in their own interests and with an element of secrecy. However, we are not concerned here with the veracity of the claims of populists but rather in the tendency to resort to conspiracies as an explanation. The need for a simple explanation is indicative of the unpolitics of populism. For Castanho, Vegetti and Littvay (2017), conspiracy provides not simplicity but also a powerful narrative.

The allusion to collusion in populism is also very natural. An opposition to an elite or an 'establishment' will naturally lead to the assumption that this grouping is somehow unified in not only ends but means. Although an elite/establishment may be either heterogeneous or pluralistic, it is a useful rallying cry of populism to try and to tar them all with the same brush. The eliding of terms like liberal/cosmopolitan/metropolitan are often attempts to frame elites in a unitary, and negative, way for populists. In some sense the monism that is inherent in the populist conception of the people and the heartland from which they derive, is here mirrored in their view of those that are not 'the people'.

## **Conclusion**

I have tried to show that the concept of unpolitics is useful one to unpack some of the aspects of populism. I have argued that underlying populism as an ideology is a very profound and fundamental ambivalence about politics such that it implicitly celebrates or is drawn to unpolitics. In practice this means that populists will often, but not always be pulled into narratives and ways of thinking associated with activities divergent from politics, namely war, religion and conspiracy theories. I have identified these as tropes, as tendencies that can occur and which taken together or separately imply a predilection for unpolitics over politics. The effect of these tropes can be powerful.

Politics as practice is about settlement. Settlements are changing sets of norms about ideas, rules and justice that shape politics at any given time in any given location. They are inherently dynamic. These can be both wider settlements about the nature of politics in a nation/state or they can be far more micro and can relate to a policy area of an issue of political contention. These settlements shape who the winners and losers are and shape the nature of political competition. They are, however, dynamic and by no means immutable and so much of politics takes place with settlements and therefore knowing the shape of (or where to look for) existing settlements will provide a fuller picture.

Populism tends to relish unsettling politics. Populism seeks unsettlements. Pierre Ostiguy (2017) talks about this as populism 'flaunting the low'. By this he means that populism revels in its transgression of norms. This is why populism is both disruptive and celebratory in its unsettling of its opponents. The other effect of populism's unsettlements is that it has the effect of lumping together its opponents. By forcing all opponents to contest populism on two levels – by countering the policies/issues/positions and by simultaneously defending the norms that are being transgressed in the manner in which these positions are put, populism conflates differences between opposition and also emphasizes its own distance from this falsely conflated grouping.

The purpose of identifying these tropes is not to use them to categorise cases of populism. They are not useful for doing this because these tropes are neither necessary nor sufficient for classification as populism. Rather the identification of these tropes is meant to help us (or perhaps only me) to unpack populism: to point to the unpolitical core of populism.

Of course, I am aware that one objection to my argument may be that I am equating politics itself with either liberalism or representative democratic politics. There is a difficulty in separating understandings of politics in the contemporary world from understandings of liberal democracy and representative politics. Of course, other forms of politics exist and even flourish



(Geddes, 1999) but it is difficult to disentangle politics from its liberal and representative forms. More prosaically, I would also suggest that populism is only a feature in liberal and representative political contexts.

The urge to unpolitics and its power in general is a source of the effectiveness of populism in contemporary politics. There is nothing new however in either populism or its unpolitics. The prevalence of contemporary populism then means that we need to address what it is that makes unpolitics to palatable and politics so unpalatable to so many at this juncture. The success of populism and the celebration of unpolitics represents perhaps a particular failing of politics at a particular time.

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