

The Enigma of Populism

ABSTRAKT

In this article, I argue that populism is vital for explaining the complex processes of construction of political identities. Drawing on Ernesto Laclau's *On Populist Reason*, I first discuss the concept of populism in relation to the work of Donald MacRae, Kenneth Minogue and Margaret Canovan. Populism is defined by them as a political movement, ideology or rhetoric. However, all of these conceptualizations seem highly problematic, because of their inability to grasp the specificity of populism. I argue that Laclau is overcoming this problem by defining populism as a political logic, that is a specific way of articulating demands and instituting the social.

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populism, politics, Laclau, poststructuralist discourse theory, post-Marxism,

Introduction

Populism is without doubt one of the most contested concepts in political theory. Even though discussion on this topic has a very long history, there is no agreement as to the core of meaning of the concept. Quite often it is defined in terms of ideology or political movement. However, differentiating it from established ideologies and political movements turns out to be very difficult, if not impossible. Furthermore, most authors define populism in negative terms and consider it to be a marginal political phenomenon (see for example Gellner and Ionescu 1969; Markowski 2004). Especially the latter characterization seems to be problematic, as we can currently observe dynamic development of right-wing populist parties in Western liberal democracies, post-socialist regimes and Latin America.

Ernesto Laclau's intervention in the debate seems to resolve most problems associated with disparate definitions of populism. I argue that conceptualization of populism in terms of a political logic enables him to overcome problems with defining its specificity, challenge the element of ethical condemnation present in many problematizations of the phenomenon and provide a convincing account of complex process of formation of political identities. To fully understand the significance of Lac-

lau's contribution, it is important to situate it within a broader intellectual context. Thus, in the first section of the essay, I briefly sketch out three different conceptualizations of populism – referring also to Laclau's problematization of these – to illustrate the characteristic features of the dominant accounts and identify problems encountered by political theorists in conceptualizing the contested term. The second section is devoted solely to Laclau's theory of populism. I conclude by indicating some of its deficiencies.

Problematizations of populism

The difficulty with populism starts at the level of conceptualization. Political theorists find it hard to define populism, often using this notion in an "allusive way". According to Laclau (2007: 4), this difficulty is not accidental: "it is rooted in the limitation of the ontological tools currently available to political analysis; that 'populism', as the locus of a theoretical stumbling block, reflects some of the limits inherent in the ways in which Political Theory has approached the question of how social agents 'totalize' the ensemble of their political experience". To develop this hypothesis, Laclau discusses and challenges dominant problematizations of populism, focusing his analysis on two books which gained canonical status in the academic literature on populism: *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics* edited by Ernest Gellner and Ghita Ionescu (1969) and Canovan's *Populism* (1981). In this section of the essay, I will limit my analysis to MacRae's "Populism as an Ideology" (1969), Minogue's "Populism as a Political Movement" (1969) and Canovan's "Two Strategies for the Study of Populism" (1982), as these articles seem to be well suited to illustrate the limits of different theories of populism.

Populist ideology and political movement

In many dominant academic interpretations populism is understood as a specific political movement and ideology. One exemplification of this kind of interpretation is MacRae's account. MacRae proposes viewing populism as a transient and weakly institutionalized political movement of predominantly rural segments of society, emerging in response to different forms of radical socio-economic changes and realizing its goals through state intervention. Its ideology is supposed to include strong belief in the virtue of community, charismatic leadership, egalitarianism, anti-elitism, traditionalism and rejection of the doctrines of historical inevitability (MacRae 1969: 168). The problems with definition of this kind are numerous. First of all, such a detailed description of populism has little value for political analysis, as it is simply impossible to find movements and ideologies which have all the enumerated features. Secondly, it does not determine the specificity of populism: "if (...) the use of

the concept is restricted to movements with a similar social base, the area of analysis is illegitimately displaced: the object of explanation is now another phenomenon – the ‘something in common’ present in many different social movements. Yet it was the definition of (...) specificity [of populism] which constituted the original problem” (Laclau 1979: 145). In other words, instead of a definition of populism, MacRae arrives at a list of common features of movements which are considered – for some reason that is not specified – to be populist. Ultimately, therefore, he does not provide a theory of populism.

Phenomenology of populism

In response to problems associated with both “narrow” and “vague” theories of populism, Margaret Canovan proposes a “phenomenological approach”. In her view, the problems with populism are quite distinct from difficulties with other concepts in political theory: “generations of political scientists have deplored, tried in vain to remedy, and managed to live with the ambiguity and vagueness of key terms like ‘democracy’, ‘elite’ and the rest. In most cases, however, there is a reasonably solid core of agreed meaning, even if this leaves plenty of room for disputes. This agreed core of meaning has been notoriously lacking in the case of ‘populism’” (Canovan 1982: 544). Thus, instead of searching for the “core of meaning” of the term and constructing an original theory of populism, Canovan prefers to construct a descriptive typology which does not limit the diversity of populist phenomena. Through analyzing different uses of the term, she arrives at a typology consisting of seven categories of populism: farmers radicalism, revolutionary intellectual populism, peasant populism, populist dictatorship, populist democracy, reactionary populism and politicians’ populism (ibid.: 550-551). Despite reservations to the idea of developing a theory of populism, Canovan claims that it is possible to draw some theoretical implications from this typology; it shows both the diversity of populist phenomena and “many interconnections and overlaps” between them (ibid.: 551). The only feature shared by all the enumerated types of populist movements is rhetoric: “populist rhetoric is anti-elitist, exalts ‘the people’, and stresses the pathos of the ‘little man’. When such symbols are cashed out in real political situations, however, the embodiments of the common man and his enemies turn out to be bewilderingly diverse. Populist rhetoric is compatible with all kinds of different social bases and economic interests, with ideologies of different kinds or with lack of ideology altogether” (ibid.: 552). This intuition is close to Laclau’s idea of a political logic, but Canovan does not elaborate on the role of populist rhetoric in different political movements, and is unable to explain the emergence of populism either.

Populist rhetoric

To illustrate one more characteristic feature of the dominant interpretations of populism, it is worth discussing Minogue’s “Populism as a Political Movement”. According to Minogue, to understand a political movement one has to analyze the language and actions of people involved in it. However, in order to interpret them correctly, “we must distinguish carefully between the rhetoric used by members of a movement – which may be randomly plagiarized from anywhere according to the needs of the moment – and the ideology which expresses the deeper currents of the movement” (Minogue 1969: 198). Referring to this distinction in characterization of American populism, Minogue claims that specific features of populist movements are well-developed rhetoric and precarious ideology, based on borrowed elements (ibid.: 208). It is quite clear from the passage quoted above that Minogue views rhetoric as some form of an instrumentalization of language which is inferior to ideology (if so, then populism has to be viewed as an inferior form of politics). In opposition to “deeply rooted” ideology, rhetoric is for him a “pure adornment of language which in no way affects the contents transmitted by it” (Laclau 2007: 12). According to Laclau, such an understanding of rhetoric can be opposed – in sociological terms – to a “notion of social actors as constituted around well-defined interests and rationally negotiating with an external milieu” (ibid.). From this standpoint, populism has to be viewed as a marginal, transitory, irrational and exceptional form of politics.

Populism as a political logic

In opposition to dominant interpretations, Laclau proves that populism is not anirrational, marginal and transient phenomenon. In fact, he shows that such descriptions of populism exclude the possibility of “determining its *differentia specifica* in positive terms”, so that the question about the specificity of populism is replaced by the question about “social *contents* (class or other sectorial interests) which populism expresses” (ibid.: 16-17). In this way, populism is reduced to a mere epiphenomenon of social reality. Laclau proposes instead viewing social reality itself as to some extent vague and indeterminate and use of populist rhetoric as a performative act undertaken in conditions of indetermination; populism simplifies the political space through “replacing a complex set of differences and determinations by a stark dichotomy whose two poles are necessarily imprecise” (ibid.: 18). If so, then vagueness of populist language is not a symptom of “intellectual emptiness of populist movements”, as Minogue and many others claim, but a basic condition for political action. Rhetoric plays a crucial role in this process, as it constitutes political subjects. As Laclau notes, rhetoric and imprecision of populist language could be eradicated only if all the differences were inscribed within the institutional system, which would be equal to replacement of politics by administration. Otherwise, populism has to be

present to some extent in every political discourse, and ultimately it becomes identical with politics: “if populism consists in postulating a radical alternative within the communitarian space, a choice at the crossroads on which the future of a given society hinges, does not populism become synonymous with politics? The answer can only be affirmative” (Laclau 2005: 47).

Demands and social totality

The first decision that Laclau makes in constructing his theory of populism is to take the *social demand* instead of the group as a minimal unit of analysis. According to him, political practices are prior over the group, as it is the latter that is constituted through political articulation of different social demands. This kind of articulation is possible and necessary in the situation in which “there is no social agent whose will coincides with the actual workings of society conceived as a totality” (ibid.: 34). Populism should be, therefore, seen as one among many forms of political articulation and not a mere epiphenomenon of social reality: “a movement is not populist because in its politics or ideology it presents actual *contents* identifiable as populist, but because it shows a particular *logic of articulation* of those contents – whatever those contents are” (ibid.: 33). Problematising populism in this way enables Laclau to challenge the binary opposition between the rhetoric and rational social actors.

Demands can emerge when some social needs cannot be self-satisfied and it is necessary to address them to the authority which is perceived to be responsible for satisfying them (ibid.: 36). Initially they take the form of isolated requests that do not challenge the legitimacy of the institutional system. Laclau calls this kind of demands democratic, because they are “formulated *to the system by an underdog* of sorts – that there is an equalitarian dimension implicit in them” and “their very emergence presupposes some kind of exclusion or deprivation” (Laclau 2007: 125). Obviously, demand can be satisfied or not, but in the latter situation – to take an example of demands emerging at the local level – “people can start to perceive that their neighbours have other, equally unsatisfied demands If the situation remains unchanged for some time, there is an accumulation of unfulfilled demands and an increasing inability of the institutional system to absorb them in a differential way (each in isolation from the others), and an equivalential relation is established between them” (ibid.: 73). Even at this local level some weak solidarity between different groups emerges, as the demands of these groups are not satisfied and they share a common enemy (these are constitutive features of equivalential chains consisting of social demands). However, formation of an antagonistic frontier between “people” and “power”, and construction of an equivalential chain consisting of unfulfilled demands, are just the two first preconditions of populism. Stabilization of

concrete discourse and the survival of popular character of demands requires further expansion of the chain of equivalences through inclusion of the demands of a broader range of social actors (this operation has its limitations, which I will discuss later) and their symbolic unification: “forces engaged in it [antagonism – T. L.] have to attribute to some of the equivalential components a role of anchorage which distinguishes them from the rest” (ibid.: 75).

Populism and institutionalism

So far, I have been talking about the development of populism at the local level. But, in fact, this notion is most often used to indicate very broad and heterogeneous political discourses. Laclau, referring to the distinction between democratic and popular demands, describes populism and institutionalism as the two main forms of these. As I already pointed out, social is constructed through both the logic of difference (when social demands are inscribed within an institutional system) and the logic of equivalence (when demands form a chain of equivalences and an antagonistic frontier between different social forces is drawn). They are in constant tension with each other, but this does not mean that they exclude themselves. Laclau illustrates this point by referring to institutionalist discourses of the welfare state and neoliberalism, and the populist discourse of the French Revolution. In the case of the first two, the logic of difference is acknowledged to be the only “legitimate way of constructing the social” (ibid.: 78). Both welfarism and neoliberalism attempt to eradicate social division through differential satisfaction of social needs; they are to be satisfied by the state and the market, respectively. However, ultimately – during installation of both political projects – equivalences and frontiers are constructed; their proponents identify different enemies and obstacles which threaten the welfare state and the market. An opposing example is French Revolution discourse, in which the logic of equivalence weakened differences, but they were never cancelled either. Through the whole revolutionary period, tension between workers’ demands and discourse of radical popular democracy was negotiated in different ways, but it was not possible to overcome this: “those who were in control of the state did not surrender to the workers’ demands, but could not ignore them either; and the workers, for their part, could not afford at any point to push their autonomy to the point of abandoning the revolutionary camp” (ibid.: 80).

What is, then, the difference between populist and institutionalist discourse? Laclau claims that it can be found at the level of nodal points structuring a discursive formation. In institutionalist discourses “differentiality claims to be the only legitimate equivalent: all differences are considered equally valid within a wider totality”, while in populist discourses “this symmetry is broken: there is a part which identifies itself with the whole” (ibid.: 82). Populism, therefore – as opposed to institutionalism – chal-

lenges hegemonic formation. When social demands are not satisfied by institutional system, people start to experience “a *lack*, a gap which has emerged in the harmonious continuity of the social. There is a fullness of the community which is missing” (ibid.: 85). These are conditions in which social antagonisms arise. In particular, those who are considered to be responsible for this lack and threaten the social order have to be excluded from the community. However, during “organic crisis” – when the symbolic framework of society providing differential positions determining the meaning of demands disintegrates and the chain of unsatisfied demands extends dynamically – it becomes increasingly hard to determinate the political frontier dividing the social; it becomes unclear who the “people” are and who the enemy threatening them is. In such periods, need for any kind of order becomes more important than identity of political force which can play the role of establishing a particular kind of order (ibid.: 87). In other words, need for order and the concomitant necessity of social division are always present, but it is not pre-determined which political forces will express it. As an illustration of this process we can take the electoral success of Law and Justice, one of the most radical right-wing parties in Poland, in the parliamentary elections in 2005. In conditions of dynamic growth of unemployment and drastic impoverishment of many social groups, when several corruption scandals at the governmental level were disclosed, and most mainstream parties were pursuing consensual, technocratic politics, Law and Justice were successful in taking over the strongest signifier of radical protest, that is “solidarity”, and articulating together demands for a strong state and traditional values in their antagonistic discourse targeting the liberal and post-communist elites. To put it briefly, Law and Justice were successful because they were the only radical political force at a time of deep political and social crisis, and it was able to define the enemy to be blamed for the crisis.

The “people”

As I have already indicated, in the process of formation of popular identity equivalential relations have to unify symbolically, that is, to “crystallize in a certain discursive identity which no longer represents democratic demands as equivalent, but the equivalential link as such” (ibid.: 93). How do these relations crystallize, if they emerge in response to dislocation of the institutional system and there is no positive feature shared by all social demands constituting particular equivalential chain? According to Laclau, construction of the “people” is radical; it “constitutes social agents as such, and does not express a previously given unity of the group. There cannot be a priori system unity, precisely because the unfulfilled demands are the expression of systemic dislocation” (ibid.: 118). This lack of structural centre that determinates particular elements of a discourse is a condition of possibility for he-

gemony and emergence of empty signifiers. In practice, hegemony means that one of the demands from the equivalential chain (depending on a particular context) splits between particularity of its content and universality of signifying a series of demands. In this way, it becomes an empty signifier, that is, an element which is able to unite different demands and whose particularity is weakened. Similarly, other social demands acquire some degree of universality through inscription within the equivalential chain and opposition to the “power”. Laclau illustrates this process by analysis of the Solidarity movement; in a period of deep socio-economic crisis, when the socialist regime was increasingly unable to meet different kinds of demands, demand for free and self-governing trade unions acquired universal meaning, indicating also struggle for political rights, civil freedoms and democratization. But ultimately, with the extension of the chain of demands, the relation between the signifier “Solidarity” and its particular content, that is workers’ demands, weakened, and later they were sacrificed; the empty signifier “Solidarity” became to a large extent detached from its working-class connotations in the 1990s and Solidarity’s struggle was constructed as a fight for freedom, embodied in institutions of liberal democracy and market economy.

Floating signifiers

So far, I have described the model in which the political frontier dividing the social is stable and can be challenged only when some demands constituting a chain of equivalences are satisfied by the institutional system. This kind of hegemonic operation can ultimately lead to disintegration of the popular camp. However, this model has to be complexified, as in reality every political frontier is much more blurred, precarious and open to subversion. According to Laclau, its instability is especially visible in periods of organic crisis, when the symbolic system disintegrates and different political forces gain the possibility to articulate and re-articulate heterogeneous demands in their hegemonic projects. In such periods, particular demands acquire partial autonomy – they become what Laclau calls *floating signifiers* – and their incorporation in a particular equivalential chain and fixation of meaning becomes dependent on the result of a hegemonic struggle between antagonistic camps (ibid.: 131-132). As I indicated previously, in such moments, the radical and universal dimension of political projects often becomes more important than their particular, ontic content: “(...) as the central signifiers of a popular discourse become partially empty, they weaken their former links with some particular contents – those contents become perfectly open to a *variety* of equivalential rearticulations. Now, it is enough that the empty popular signifiers keep their radicalism – that is, their ability to divide society into two camps – while, however, the chain of equivalences that they

unify becomes a different one, for the political meaning of the whole populist operation to acquire an opposite political sign” (Laclau 2005: 42).

Heterogeneity

The model of political antagonism based on division between the “power” and the “people” has to be further complexified by consideration of unfulfilled demands, which cannot be incorporated in the equivalential chain of the popular camp, because they clash with the particular contents of demands which already form part of the chain (as this particularity is never eradicated). Laclau notes that the relation between the chain of equivalences and this kind of demands is different from the opposition between popular camp and power: “an *antagonistic* camp is fully represented as the negative reverse of a popular identity which would not exist without the negative reference; but in the case of an outside which is opposed to the inside just because it does not have access to the space of representation, ‘opposition’ means simply ‘leaving aside’ and, as such, it does not in any sense shape the identity of what is inside” (Laclau 2007: 140). This is one of the forms of what Laclau calls *social heterogeneity*. In Marx’s interpretation of historical process, this form of exteriority is attributed to *Lumpenproletariat*, as it does not participate in capitalist relations of production and it is not functional for capitalist reproduction. However, ultimately Marx has to extend this category to cover unproductive labour, and it soon turns out that *Lumpenproletariat* cannot be considered a mere exterior of a historical process, so the latter, in turn, cannot be reduced to a single logic of a dialectic between productive forces and relations of production (ibid.: 145). What’s more, Laclau proves that heterogeneity operates even within the relations of production, as antagonism does not simply follow from them. Consequently, the distinction between the “inside” and “outside” of the institutional system becomes blurred, and it turns out that “any kind of underdog (...) has to have something of the nature of the *Lumpenproletariat* if it is going to be an antagonistic subject” (ibid.: 152).

Conclusions

The main aim of this essay was to discuss Ernesto Laclau’s theory of populism as developed in *On Populist Reason*. I was trying to show that defining populism as a political logic enables Laclau to overcome problems with defining its specificity, characteristic for mainstream approaches, in which populism is conceptualized as a distinct ideology or political movement (MacRae, Minogue), and is more productive than abandoning theoretical ambitions and limiting analysis to enumeration of different uses of the term “populism” in academic literature (Canovan). In opposition to theorists who take the group as a minimal unit of analysis and focus on the social

contents which populism is supposed to express, Laclau analyses complex processes of articulation of heterogeneous social demands and the role that populist rhetoric plays in constitution of political identities. To understand this constitutive role of populism, it is necessary to refer to the ontological presuppositions of post-structuralist discourse theory. Laclau assumes that the identity of objects, subjects and practices is constituted within discourses, but is never fixed, as discourses are prone to influence of elements which were excluded in the process of articulation. However, as without some kind of closure there would be no identity, one of the elements of a particular discourse has to assume the function of representing this “failed totality” and structure the discourse. Social demands can be analyzed as elements of a discourse which emerges, when they are not satisfied by the institutional system, aggregate and form equivalential chain. In periods of organic crisis, ability of institutional system to satisfy social demands in isolation from each other decreases and chain of equivalences extends. However, with the extension of the chain, the universal task of challenging the institutional order might prevail over the particularity of social demands and some of them might be sacrificed. How does this relate to vagueness of populist language and constitutive role of rhetoric? It should be clear by now that this vagueness is not accidental and does not stem from some kind of underdevelopment of populist movements, but is related to the fact that social reality is radically contingent (contingency becomes visible in periods of organic crisis). Populist symbols constitute political subjects out of plurality of heterogeneous social demands, when the institutional system is in crisis, and it becomes increasingly hard to determinate the identity of “friends” and “enemies”.

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