Introduction: Populism in the 21st Century: Critical reflections on a global phenomenon

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Thus far, the 21st century has ushered in a period of high volatility in established political systems across the world. The current climate of political instability is, in many ways, the result of longer-term trends coming to a head. Rising social inequality, increased migration flows, and technological advancements in industrial production have driven a neo-liberal, globalized economy that has altered the power structures of advanced and developing countries alike (Kriesi 2013). Poverty and unemployment have risen, national populations are more diverse than ever before, and urban concentration threatens the prosperity and sustainability of rural regions. The changing social and political landscape, compounded by more recent developments like international terrorism and global financial crises, has proven a difficult terrain for national governments to effectively navigate when responding to popular grievances (Held 2006).

Filling the void, new challengers to the political arena have emerged. They chastise the failures of mainstream elites and offer alternative, controversial agendas. Taking the form of political parties but also social movements, these outsiders hail from across the political spectrum and claim to represent the sovereign will of the people. Today, the so-called 'populists' are garnering unprecedented media attention and electoral support in nearly every corner of the globe.

In Europe, the results of the 2014 European Parliament elections were largely interpreted as a populist backlash, giving rise to the success of Eurosceptic parties. At the domestic level, right-wing populist parties have garnered a parliamentary foothold – and in some cases governmental power – in countries across Western, Northern, and Eastern Europe. Typically, this right-wing variety of populism incorporates a cultural dimension that advocates restricting immigration and advances traditional, conservative values (Mudde 2013). Expressions of European right-wing populism include the Front National in France, Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, and the Danish People's Party in Denmark, but the phenomenon is far from limited to parliamentary politics. Social

movements like PEGIDA and the Soldiers of Odin are likewise regarded as representatives of right-wing populism. The left-wing variety of populism, meanwhile, is most prevalent in Southern Europe and is generally couched in economic terms, for example in rejection of EU austerity measures in response to the Eurozone crisis (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). Here, the most notable examples include SYRIZA in Greece, Podemos in Spain, and to some extent also Alternativet in Denmark (Husted and Hansen 2017).

The populist phenomenon, however, is by no means limited to Europe. In the United States, both right- and left-wing populist manifestations can be observed in factions of the Republican and Democratic parties, respectively. The election of Donald Trump confirmed the appeal of a right-wing populist message to the American electorate, while the 'Economic Populism' of Democrats like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren resonates with leftist voters concerned with social inequality (The Economist 2017). In Latin America, the history of left-wing populism is rich and spearheaded by leaders like Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Juan Perón in Argentina, and Evo Morales in Bolivia (Hawkins 2009). The populist label has also been applied to contemporary Asia-Pacific leaders like Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, Shinzō Abe of Japan, Narendra Modi of India, and Pauline Hanson of Australia (Moffitt 2016; Chacko and Jayasuriya 2017).

The sheer diversity of contexts to which the term 'populism' has been applied begs the question: What is populism, exactly? The term was first used in the United States in connection with the People's Party: a short-lived, left-wing political party borne out of agrarian unrest in the American South at the end of the 19th century (Goodwyn 1976). However, populist manifestations extend much further back in time than the etymology of the term itself. In fact, we can trace populism as far back as the Ancient Greeks and the iron-fisted, Athenian general Cleon in 400BC. Cleon was the first common citizen to join the Athenian political class, and he regularly accused the political elite of putting rhetoric and sophistry ahead of fair judgment, which was better exercised by "ordinary men" (see, for example, The Mytilenean Debate in Thucydides, *History* 3.37). In the interim between then and now, several transformative political actors and events throughout history share elements of populism: Robespierre and the French Revolution, the American Federalists and the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Hitler and the Völkisch Movement underpinning the Weimar Republic. In each case, a socially constructed 'people' were placed in contrast with the existing ruling elite, and significant political transformations followed suit.

From the examples outlined above, populism is seemingly a truly global phenomenon and a recurring feature of history. However, just within the past decade the concept of populism has received a resurgence of attention in the academic literature, particularly – but not exclusively – among European scholars. To introduce readers of this volume to some of the existing understandings of populism, we outline four theoretical perspectives on the concept below (for a more exhaustive list, see Pappas 2016).

Table 1: Overview of the most prominent perspectives on populism.

Perspective	Main characteristics	Key theorists
Populism as an ideology	Populism is an ideology that considers society split into two homogeneous groups: the pure people vs. the corrupt elite. However, it is a *thin* ideology because it lacks political consistency and attaches itself to *thick* ideologies like liberalism or socialism.	Cas Mudde Christóbal Kaltwasser Margaret Canovan
Populism as a style	Populism is a style of political representation that includes the discursive content of what politicians say, as well as the performative elements that accompany discourse, for example: rhetorical devices, gestures, staging, attire, accents, and mannerisms. Populists appeal to 'the people', talk or act in unconventional ways, and conjure a sense of crisis through political performances.	Benjamin Moffitt Simon Tormey Michael Bossetta
Populism as a movement	Populism is an undemocratic movement that primarily exists on the right side of the political spectrum. It is characterized as anti-pluralist in the sense that its proponents see themselves as the only representatives of the 'true' people and excludes those who do not belong to this category. Populism should be fought with liberal democratic means.	Jan-Werner Müller Robert Jansen
Populism as a logic	Populism is a logic of articulation that unifies political identities in equivalential chains against a common adversary. The adversary is often known as 'the elite' or 'the establishment', but this is not a given. Populism is *not* a distinct trait of particular movements or parties, but an integral part of *all* political projects. As such, the end of populism coincides with the end of politics.	Ernesto Laclau Chantal Mouffe David Howarth

The preeminent view among academics is that populism is best conceptualized as an ideology (Canovan 2002; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013), although more recently scholars have argued that populism is better approached as a political style (Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Bossetta 2017), a political movement (Jansen 2011; Müller, 2016), or a logic of articulation (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2005; Howarth 2007). In the table above, we have outlined the main characteristics of these four perspectives, in an effort to supply the reader with a – somewhat simplified – overview of the literature on populism before embarking on the forthcoming articles.

As this overview shows, the four perspectives share some similarities. For instance, all four hold that populism establishes some kind of antagonistic relationship between people and elite – or, at least between 'underdog' and 'topdog'. That said, there are also several major differences, revolving around questions like: Is populism limited to one side of the political spectrum? Are some ideological elements axiomatic to all expressions of populism? Is populism compatible with democracy? Should we try to eliminate populism, or is it an integral part of the democratic process? Such disagreements have led some observers to question the concept's usefulness, based on the grounds that populism lacks any kind of positive content (see Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). While we acknowledge the need to specify populism in positive terms and refine the concept's analytical utility, we also posit that the diversity of populism theories provides fertile ground for developing innovative, comparative research designs that can yield empirical discovery. The plurality of approaches to the concept allows researchers to compare an array of different empirical cases, while also allowing for multiple views on the same phenomenon. And if that is not constitutive of healthy scientific and/or democratic debate, then what is?

Outline of the special issue

At the outset of this special issue, we asked the authors to engage critically with the concept of populism, and each of the contributions accomplishes this task. Through a variety of novel theoretical and empirical perspectives, the articles raise a number of provoking arguments that challenge longstanding assumptions about populism. While some articles, such as Allan Dreyer Hansen's piece on populism as an articulatory logic and the interview with Jan-Werner Müller (conducted by Niels Boel, Carsten Jensen, and André Sonnichsen), are driven by theoretical aspirations, they still draw on a range of empirical examples to support their claims. The other articles – Jørgen Bæk Simonsen's piece on Islamic populism, Kristoffer Holt and André Haller's piece on PEGIDA's relationship with mainstream media, and Lazaros Karavasilis' piece on right-wing populism in the Greek public sphere – analyze distinct empirical phenomena but still engage critically with the concept of populism. We hope that, through reading the diverse range of empirical cases, theoretical approaches, and research designs included in this issue, the reader will get a better sense of what populism actually *is* but

also – and perhaps more importantly – be inspired to pursue his or her own study of populism within other disciplines and in other empirical contexts. In the following, we will provide a brief description of each of the five articles:

Article 1 by **Allan Dreyer Hansen** (2017) revisits Laclau's seminal theory of populism as a political logic of articulation. From the outset, Hansen questions the notion that populism is necessarily undemocratic, which has been advanced most recently by Jan-Werner Müller (see interview in this issue). Hansen does so by conducting an illustrative analysis of the 1934 Danish Social Democrats' party program, 'Danmark for Folket' (Denmark for the People), which marked a corner stone in the history of the party. With this program, the Social Democrats went from being a class-party focused on the working class to becoming a mass-party focused on the people as a whole. The Social Democrats would remain Denmark's largest party for the rest of the century, thus playing a key role in the constitution of what is today known as the Nordic welfare state. It may seem surprising to use precisely this program as an illustration of populism in action, but Hansen's point is that populism should not be understood as a particular ideology or movement, but as the practice of unifying political identities in equivalential chains against a common adversary. This is done by organizing the chain of political identities around an 'empty signifier' (i.e. a signifier without a signified). In the case of the Social Democrats, the empty signifier is the notion of 'the people', which is positioned in an agonistic relationship with 'Capital'. All political projects, regardless of ideological affiliations, employ this practice to a greater or lesser extent. Hence, the more general point in Hansen's article is that populism is present in varying degrees in all kinds of politics (even in the most technocratic and institutionalized political projects), which is why it makes little sense to conceive of populism as undemocratic *par excellence.*

Article 2 by **Jørgen Bæk Simonsen** (2017) departs from the intriguing question: If populism is conceived as an anti-pluralist phenomenon emerging in reaction to 'the establishment', does it then only exist in pluralist and democratic societies, or is it possible to detect populist tendencies in less democratic contexts? In other words, does it make sense to speak of populism in more totalitarian societies? Simonsen's answer is clearly affirmative. To illustrate this point, Simonsen takes the reader on a historical journey through 20th century Egypt and Iran. In the case of Egypt, he shows that the success of *The Muslim Brotherhood* in the 1930's and 1940's was very much predicated on the persistent articulation of 'true' and 'authentic' Muslim values in opposition to the more secular values that dominated Egypt society in the wake of British colonialization. Similarly, in the case of Iran, the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini can likewise be interpreted as a successful attempt at splitting Iranian society into two antagonistic camps: Supporters of the secular Shah dynasty vs. supporters of Khomeini's Islamic program. While the former group was framed as traitors and Western lackeys, the latter was described as the 'authentic' people of Iran, thus providing Khomeini with a pretext for instigating the revolt against the Shah in 1979. These two examples serve to illustrate that, although

populism may be a relatively modern phenomenon, it does not require a democratic and pluralist set-up to flourish.

Article 3 by **Kristoffer Holt and André Haller** (2017) casts its empirical gaze on the social media communication of the PEGIDA movement and offers a comparative analysis of PEGIDA Facebook pages in four countries: Germany, Austria, Norway, and Sweden. In particular, Holt and Haller set out to investigate how these national PEGIDA chapters used Facebook to criticize the mainstream media as 'Lügenpresse' (the 'lying press') at the height of the refugee crisis in 2015. The authors find that in all four countries, the PEGIDA movement expresses a deep skepticism of the mainstream media. However, interestingly and going against their original hypothesis, the authors also find that PEGIDA references the media affirmatively. That is, PEGIDA will positively reference and disseminate mainstream media content on Facebook when it supports PEGIDA's own position on immigration or migrants. Holt and Haller's comparative analysis also detects significant differences in how the national chapters use social media to reference traditional media outlets. The Swedish Facebook page, for instance, differs from the other three in that it rarely contests the media but, when it does, tends to do so by linking indirectly to alternative media sites. In Germany, Austria, and Norway, PEGIDA Facebook pages tended to reference mainstream media more often and directly attack specific statements included in their articles. The analysis also uncovers differences in terms of PEGIDA's affirmative references to mainstream media online. PEGIDA's German and Austrian chapters were aimed at confirming their position or legitimizing the movement, whereas in Sweden and Norway the Facebook pages were more used to promote events or engage with supporters. The findings ultimately suggest that PEGIDA has a selective relationship with the mainstream media on Facebook, and not all references degrade the media as 'Lügenpresse'.

Article 4 by **Lazaros Karavasilis** (2017) centers on the interesting question: when emerging as a left-wing phenomenon, how is populism framed in right-wing, alternative media spaces online? Karavasilis explores the Greek discourse about populism through a study of the website 'Anti-news', which hosts opinions from anonymous contributors ranging from center- to extreme-right. Finding that references to populism on the site have dramatically increased from 2010-2016 in the wake of the European economic crisis, Karavasilis shows that that the right-wing in Greece has taken up an elitist position of 'anti-populism'. Running counter to most European conceptions of populism, the article argues that in Greece, the populism promoted by left-wing parties such as SYRIZA is interpreted by the right as non-progressive and subversive to 'common sense': pursuing a liberal economic development through closer ties with the European Union. Interestingly, Karavasilis argues that right-wing 'anti-populists' in Greece view left-wing populism as traditional and anachronistic. At the same time, anti-populists consider a return to ethnocentrism and state regulation the primary means to counteract populism and modernize Greece in the 21st century economy. The article raises provoking questions about whether nativism is a defining feature of populism or, if notions of national identity can be used by anti-populists to promote a progressive agenda.

Article 5 is based on an interview with **Jan-Werner Müller**, conducted by **Niels Boel, Carsten Jensen, and André Sonnichsen** in Vienna (Boel et al., 2017). Throughout the interview, Müller sustains his core argument that populism is an undemocratic and anti-pluralist movement spearheaded and personified by politicians like Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, and Viktor Orbán. According to Müller, populism is exclusionary and, thus, anti-pluralist in at least two ways. First, it is exclusionary against the elites, because populists refuse to recognize the moral legitimacy of other political candidates, and because 'the elite' always serves as the number one scapegoat in populist rhetoric. Müller refers to this as the populist claim to a 'monopoly of representation'. Secondly, populism is exclusionary against common people who do not share the views of the populist. These people, Müller claims, risk having their status as part of 'the people' revoked by the populist – the most obvious example being Trump's verbal attacks on 'all other people' but the real people. At different points during the interview, Müller is asked to ponder the difference between right-wing and left-wing populism. While he maintains that populism is far more prevalent on the right, he does not deny the possibility of a left-wing populism, citing Chavez as the most prominent example. However, contrary to theorists like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, he does not see left-wing populism as a vehicle for challenging the hegemony of neo-liberalism and revitalizing liberal democracy. As he puts it: "Populism is always detrimental to democracy".

Taken together, the five articles included here illustrate the level of diversity that currently characterizes the state of populism research. The works differ in their theoretical understanding of populism as well as the empirical cases studied: ranging from authoritarian Egypt in the 1900's to consolidated democracies in contemporary Europe. Some critics might argue that the range of perspectives and cases included in this issue serve to dilute the analytical utility of populism scholarship. As editors, we would argue the opposite: that a broad and inclusive understanding of populism yields exciting avenues for innovative, comparative research. As a grand theory of populism seems unlikely to emerge in the near future, and charges of populism as an empty signifier continue to mount, we wish to encourage scholars to embrace the void and engage openly (and critically) with the concept as a means to shed light on existing social, cultural, and political phenomena. Populism is but one lens that attempts to ascertain the complexity of modern day politics. It is neither a sufficient cause nor reducible effect of this complexity. Nevertheless, critical reflections regarding how populism can help make sense of political phenomena – or not – are useful to further our understanding of contemporary political processes in the 21st century.

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