

Populism vs Demagogism: What if anti-populists are the real demagogues?

Panel 823 Populism/anti-populism left and right

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Objectives

- 1) To draw a distinction between populism and demagoguery
- 2) To enrich the theoretical framework related to the study of anti-populism.
- 3) Demagoguery beyond anti-populism?



Populism VS Demagogy: Etymological distinction

Demagogy: the attempt made by the demagogue to achieve or keep power by manipulating and mobilizing people. It share affinities with Polybius' ochlocracy (mob-rule)

Populism: The people against the elite (minimal definition)

‘Demagogy is the art of arousing and enchanting the masses that, according to Aristoteles, lead to oligarchy or tyranny. At any rate, this term points to an act and a “mobilization” from above which has nothing to do with democracy as power from below [...]. [Populism] denotes a genuine “immediate” democracy, which stems from below and that, in this respect, is the exact opposite of demagogy’ (Sartori, 2007).



Broadening the picture: a hegemonic perspective

Who is ‘the elite’? What happens if in the demagogic top-down flow, ‘top’ refers to the hegemonic bloc?

Qualunquismo ≠ Populism

Demagogue ≠ Demagogism



Demagogism as a response to a hegemonic crisis

Both populism and anti-populism are a reaction to failure (Stavrakakis et al. 2018).

Populism: performance of the crisis (negative) and construction of the people (positive)

Anti-populism: performance of the crisis (negative) and (re)production of normality (positive)

‘The crisis creates situations which are dangerous in the short-run [...] The traditional ruling class, which has numerous trained cadres, changes men and programmes and, with greater speed than is achieved by the subordinate classes, reabsorbs the control that was slipping from its grasp. Perhaps it may make sacrifices, and expose itself to an uncertain future by demagogic promises ; but it retains power’ (Gramsci, 1971, p. 210).

‘Things become comical when the demagogue does not know that he is one; that is, when one functions in practice as if one really believed that the cowl is the monk, that the cap is the brain’ (Gramsci, 1992, p. 156-157).



Anti-populist demagogism

‘[Populism] enables the demagogic use of the rejection of extremism: the anti-populist discourse is a media alternative of the “moderate” posture, constituting and asserting itself by the rejection of “extremisms” (real or assumed, from the right or left). In the name of a virtuous center, of a majority circle of reasonable people or of the only legitimate party, that of “respectable” movements and parties. [...] Opposing populism, or the many repulsive forms it is associated with, it would be erected, therefore, “the field of reason”’ (Taguieff, 1998, p. 8).



- Demagogism can be described as an active and peculiar hegemonic practice that reproduces normality when common sense stops being a habitus. The failure is symbolized by performing a different crisis propagated by the populist threat and **positivized through the (re)production of normality**. It makes the cowl become the monk. Anti-populism, as a mainstream discourse that aims to defend the status-quo (i.e. normality) against a counter-hegemonic project, acts like the Athenian demagogue that pleased the masses only for his own purposes.
- Neglection of democratic demands by denying their rational nature.

We don't accept the reality of our future that will be in the globalization of markets and a multiethnic and multiracial society? [...] Therefore we build enemies in our head that are, in this historical moment, migrants and supranational institutions like the EU, the markets, the FMI and so on. [...] This way of thinking is [psychic souverainism] (Casolari in Enciclopedia Treccani).



Demagogism beyond anti-populism? Normality as a fantasy

*“There are some in our country who want to encroach into our families, schools, kindergartens, into our lives; who want to steal our culture, freedom, rights; they attack our sacred values, they attack the Church. **They want what is normal for us [. . .] to become contested**” (Kaczyński, 2019).*



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Thank you for your attention!

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