

# Using Gramsci and Laclau to understand contemporary Populism



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By Anver Saloojee

Many contemporary analysts who reflect on the rise of 21st century populism around the world are ahistorical and lack a critical perspective which would allow them to distinguish progressive populism from reformist and right wing populism. They do not take a step back to look at the rich and textured body of critical literature on populism as an ideology and as a political movement.

The past few years have seen the growth of a huge body of literature on populism seeking to explain the rise of populist movements and leaders around the world, and in particular in Europe and the United States of America (USA). There is no doubt that globally we are in a political moment of populist upsurge and it can be argued this is very much a response to globalisation and the globalisation of the crisis of capitalism occasioned by the 2009 global economic collapse. Populists have been victorious in numerous countries including Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey. In Italy a deal was struck between the far-right Northern League and the populist Five Star Movement and again migration was used as a significant electoral issue by the political parties on the right.

Populism is often linked to the notion that leaders and parties speak for “the people” against elites. Examples of this include the election of Donald Trump, with his “drain the swamp” rhetoric; the UK’s vote for Brexit and Nigel Farage’s claim that it was a victory for the people against the elites. The use of migration as a serious wedge issue in electoral politics in Europe and elsewhere, the rise of the anti-migrant sentiment, xenophobia, Islamophobia and racism in much of Europe (and the USA) have all prompted serious reflection on contemporary populism. Recently the right wing Freedom Party in Austria was successful in contesting the presidential elections. Its candidate Norbert Hofer challenged his opponent with the claim “You have the haute volée [high society] behind you; I have the people with me.”

In the United Kingdom there is Nigel Farage railing against the

corrupted "political class, calling for a "political tsunami", by a "people's army" to support "democracy" and reclaim "their country". In India Prime Minister Modi claimed his electoral victory his 2014 electoral victory was the victory of "the will of the people" blessed by the Hindu god Lord Krishna (janata jan janārdan); while in South Africa the Economic Freedom Front articulates both leftist rhetoric and racist and chauvinist sentiment as mechanisms to secure gains in the 2019 elections. On the left Podemos, the populist Spanish party, wants to give immigrants the right to vote, while on the other end the President of the USA wants to deport undocumented immigrants. This notion of speaking for the people against a real or imagined 'others' finds expression in many countries.

The elections that elevated these leaders and movements have been met with shock in many parts of the world, and particularly among the world's democratic establishments. They are perceived to be a threat to the core of democracy and its institutions. Is the current populist political moment a forerunner of a more sustained age of populism where the disaffected, the disenfranchised, the marginalised and all those deeply impacted by the 2009 economic crisis are drawn to the rhetoric of populism (of both the progressive and the right wing variants)? There is no doubt that 21st Century populism is directly linked to the democratic deficit and political disenchantment with institutional democracy, growing inequality within nation states and across regions, unprecedented technology change, economic stagnation, the erosion of the historic post war capital/labour compact (and the restructuring of those relations beyond the level of the nation state) and deindustrialisation. All of these have had disastrous consequences of the working classes and the middle classes in the European Union and in North America, Latin America and parts of Asia.

However, much of the recent reflections, analyses and the plethora of books and articles on contemporary populism globally is devoid of historical analysis. Populism is not a new

phenomenon, nor is it a homogenous concept. It has been hotly contested and it behoves us to take a step back and look at the debates on populism so as to get a firmer understanding of its contemporary rise, its differing national manifestations, roots and political expressions.

Surveying the literature on populism, what immediately becomes apparent is the immense confusion surrounding the term. Is it about a leadership style, is it a political movement, an ideology, a regime, or merely a tendency which sporadically appears in diverse types of movements and is it a symptom of political dissatisfaction with traditional democratic institutions and politics?

Certainly populism, given its high level of generality, can be usefully employed to explain the 19th Century Narodniki movement in Russia, the rise in the USA of a radical leftwing political

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party that called itself "Populist" which swept much of the country in the 1890s and Peronism in 20th Century Argentina. And I would argue that, in the case of South Africa, it can explain the simultaneous existence of both the ANC and Inkatha during the Apartheid era.

The fluidity of a populist movement coupled with the open identification of the movement with a charismatic leader (Nasserism, Peronism, Vargism) lead many to be skeptical and mistrustful of populist movements. Populist movements do have certain similarities – charismatic leadership; an organisational form that revolves around the leader; a hierarchical order; an appeal to the "people"; and, initially at least, an ideology that reflects a heterogeneous mass base.

Despite appearances to the contrary there are important differences in the

movements, leaders and ideologies that can be labelled populist. The differences are to be sought in their genesis, the forms the movement takes, their modus operandi, their specific appeals to the "people" and the content of their ideologies. In spite of a core of similarities, populism manifests itself differently in different (and in some cases such as Apartheid South Africa, in similar) historical circumstances. A superficial treatment of the different manifestations of populism obscures the significant similarities and contributes much to the confusion around the use of the concept, leading many to search for an all embracing definition of populism.

Analyses of populism can be largely grouped into four strands. The first focuses on the class basis of populism. It can be seen as a response by the petit bourgeoisie to ever changing capitalist relations of production. In 19th Century North America it was an expression of small farmers; in Russia the peasantry; in Latin America, either the "disposable" mass or more commonly the middle class and alienated elites.

The second strand – the modernisation approach – sees populism as a response to the problems generated in the developing world undergoing transition to modern industrial countries in the context of globalisation. The third approach is the descriptive shopping list which enumerates the features of populism as movement and ideology, and then proceeds to ascertain which movements and ideologies meet their criteria. And the fourth approach, largely applied to the post World War 2 developing world locates populism in the context of underdevelopment.

A more sound theoretical approach to populism that allows for nuanced interpretations of contemporary forms of populism requires drawing on the Gramscian notions of hegemony, crises and organic intellectuals and the Laclauian notion of the fusion of popular democratic and working class demands. The significance of this approach is that it links populism to crises and vice versa and at the same time it highlights the role organic

intellectuals and the leaders of a populist movement play in choosing messages and options which ultimately shape the organisation and its political direction.

Laclau distinguishes between “the people” and a “class” – individuals are, by virtue of their social location simultaneously defined by their class, their race and gender, and being a part of the “people”, the citizenry writ large. Individuals from a variety of class backgrounds therefore can have a similar experience (for example racism or sexism) and therefore constitute the people. Political struggle is not just class struggle; it can also be the struggle of the people against other forms of oppression. The people can and often do make demands that lack a specific class content. The ideological hegemony of the dominant class is that it is able to incorporate popular democratic demands into its ideological discourse and thereby neutralise its antagonism to the state. This has been the success of Trump – the incorporation of the discontent of the white working and middle classes into his discourse and his electoral campaign. These groups have largely been left destitute by the impact of globalisation and deindustrialisation. Understanding this, Trump’s discourse consciously includes being anti-elitism while being a member of the dominant class; the anti-immigrant rhetoric; the return to protectionism and isolationism; an affinity with strong male authoritarian leaders; and sustained attacks on mainstream media.

Populism is linked to the existence of the entity “the people” in such a fashion that the demands of the people are incorporated into the ideology and the everyday rhetoric of the dominant class, so that the latter can rule at the level of institutional democracy. It is only when the dominated classes are able to dislodge popular demands from the ideological discourse of the ruling class that they pose a threat to the hegemony of the dominant bloc. For Gramsci, populism has its origin in crisis. It can result from contradictions between fractions of the power bloc (a crisis of hegemony) and or it can result when the dominant class can no longer

contain the demands of the people (a crisis of transformism).

When the ruling class can no longer neutralise popular democratic demands there is either a hegemonic crisis which opens the possibility of the emergence of right wing populism; or there emerges progressive populism of the dominated classes. It is essential to understand that what is populist in an ideological discourse is the particular incorporation of popular demands in an antagonistic manner. Thus we have Trump incorporating popular demands in a manner different to the way in which similar demands were incorporated in the Brexit vote in the UK, or the way right wing parties incorporated similar demands in Italy and elsewhere.

Two important things emerge from the above – first the relationship between populism and crises and

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second that populism can take a variety of forms. The simultaneous existence of two very different forms of populism on the political terrain and their different responses to the “crisis” suggests that any theory linking crisis and populist responses must be cognisant of the large space open for alternate forms of political leadership, political messages and organisation to exist. Furthermore, the different responses suggest that populist movements do not exist in a vacuum.

The origin of populism (progressive, reformist or right wing) must be sought in the particular conditions which give rise to hegemonic crises within the power bloc, the organic crisis of the state, economic crises of capitalism (the global crisis of 2009-14) and the crises engendered

by the processes of globalisation. These crises heighten contradictions within the power bloc and exacerbate the “people-power bloc” contradictions. The deindustrialisation of the USA, occasioned by globalisation and the economic rise of China and the 2009 financial meltdown created conditions which left the white working class and the middle classes in the so called rust belt vulnerable to the xenophobic messages of Trump. In a similar vein the very slow economic recovery of Europe in the post 2009 era left many of the EU countries vulnerable to populist ideologues who were willing to peddle racist, anti-immigrant and xenophobic messages to secure electoral gains.

Depending on the specific form the crisis takes there will emerge a populist solution (or multiple populist solutions). Whether the specific form of populism developed will transcend its particular range (from progressive populism to socialism or right wing populism to fascism), will depend on a wide variety of socio-political circumstances – among them the exact nature of the people-power bloc contradictions, the nature of the hegemonic crisis, the receptivity of the people to racist, chauvinist and xenophobic interpellations and the response of the state to the dispossessed.

Gramsci’s contribution is that his formulation allows us to go beyond seeing populism simply as an ideology to seeing populism as movement and organisation. Since populist movements can take on a variety of organisational forms and populist ideologies can vary widely, it is imperative to show how popular democratic “interpellations” are articulated into the ideology of the working class in a manner antagonistic to the state and the prevailing ideology. Popular participation predicated on an antagonism to the state requires mediation by politico-organisational structures – mediation (i) between a charismatic leader and a heterogeneous mass base; (ii) of class contradictions internal to the organisation; and (iii) ideological thrusts which stem from internal struggles and conflicts.

A typology of the various forms of populism – progressive, reformist or

right wing, to have than taxonomic or classificatory value, can be understood by looking at the class basis of the movement (not at its rhetoric). However even that may not be sufficient. Many populist movements with the same class composition (petit-bourgeois leadership with a working class or peasant base) have differing political tendencies – they can be authoritarian or progressive (Inkatha and the ANC being cases in point). Since there is no general law linking the type of populist movement with its class composition, and since the class composition of the leadership is insufficient to determine the class character of the movement, we must turn to the formulation by Gramsci and look at the class interests the movement serves. In a period of “catastrophic equilibrium” it is possible for a mediator (a charismatic leader) to “rise above” the class struggle, the social conflict and consolidate power in her/his hands. This consolidation of power in the hands of a strong leader speaks directly to Gramsci’s salient observations about Caesarism being progressive or reactionary. It is progressive when it advances the interests of progressive forces and it is regressive when it advances the interests of reactionary forces in society.

Following Gramsci’s line of reasoning, many populist regimes are potentially Caesarist, for their leaderships often acquire a mediating role to become “separated/autonomous” from their base of support. What distinguishes progressive from right wing populism is class interests. A progressive populist movement is one that:

- incorporates and articulates working class demands in its political agenda;
- consciously eschews racism, sexism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, ethnocentrism etc. as mobilising tools;
- has an organisational and membership bias in favour of the working class;
- incorporates the organic intellectuals of the working class within its decision-making structures; and
- both challenges the state and the prevailing ideology and provides a coherent progressive alternative to it. Right wing populism on the other

hand does not challenge the state but seeks an accommodation with the dominant discourse, rhetorically challenges elites, speaks the language of the people but uses “othering”, racism, chauvinism, xenophobia etc., as tools to mobilise a base of popular support (at the ballot box and beyond) and ultimately uses authoritarianism and political bullying (for example at mass rallies) to maintain its base of support and to deal with any challenges to its authority. Right wing populism in pre-war Germany and Italy, even though it made cross-class appeals, was never able to win significant sectors of the working class over to its side. In fact right wing populism, the forerunner to fascism, rested squarely on the middle strata for its base of support. Where both forms

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of populism exist on the same political terrain and seek to draw support from largely the same constituency, political conflict (and potentially violence) is inevitable.

A reformulated theory of populism as has been briefly developed here, is important to understanding the rise of various forms of movements labeled populist in the 21st Century in Europe and elsewhere. This reformulation begins with looking at the ideological basis of the movement and looks at the form the organisation takes. Central to this is to analyse the very nature of the crisis which gives rise to populism and to recognise as Gramsci does that populist movements, born in response

to crises, will have a multi-class base. Populist movements respond to, but also shape, crises. This formulation alerts us to the potentially different responses populist movements on the same political terrain would have to the continually evolving crisis of the social formation.

Contemporary populism is about the people expressing class antagonisms through the people/class interpellation. And the relationship between populism and crises suggests that the leadership, including the organic intellectuals, of a populist movement plays a vital role in shaping the messages of political mobilisation. Populist movements are affected by “formative episodes” when objective and subjective factors coincide to open up large spaces for the exercise of creative political leadership. A great deal of the responsibility for political creativity will be left up to the political activists in populist movements – activists who will respond to both repressive state actions and spontaneous and semi-spontaneous political actions initiated by the people against the power bloc.

Political activists in populist movements have to organise politically on what Gramsci calls the “terrain of the conjunctural” which is also the terrain on which the ruling class seeks to hold onto power (and the terrain on which right wing populism would be mobilising its mass base). Populism has exposed deep fissures between capitalism and democracy so the salient question of this populist moment is whether progressive populism can find a way to accommodate the big challenges of the day – among them the return to protectionism; the calls for tighter border controls on the movement of people; the environment; protection for the rights of minorities and the broader political disaffection with institutional democracy.

Progressive populism has to reclaim democracy in the name of the people. It has to be unashamedly opposed to neoliberalism. It has to expose the dangers of exclusion so deeply embedded in right wing populism. Unless it can do all of this progressive populism will concede the political terrain to right wing populism. ■