ABSTRACT: Few concepts exert more contemporary appeal than ‘populism’. Despite its dizzyingly large connotational field, its definitional elusiveness, and its normative duplicity, one point of convergence stands out for contemporary commentators: that ours is an age of ‘populist politics’. In attempting to grasp populism’s conceptual slipperiness, this paper will use a strictly contextualist method in investigating how certain uses of the word ‘populism’, mostly in academic milieus, came to define contemporary understandings. It will do so by reference to one of the most celebrated treatments of the topic in recent academic history – Jan-Werner Müller’s What is Populism? (2016) – showing how Müller’s primary conceptual axis, which posits ‘populism’ and ‘pluralism’ as oppositional political poles, derives its historical roots from American modernization theory. In the 1950s and 1960s, American political scientists such as Richard Hofstadter, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Daniel Bell first formulated this form of dichotomy in both historiographical and sociological work. Most of these political scientists harboured a strong resentment towards indigenous traditions of American populism, and their epochal work on ‘populism’ in the 1950s, as I will argue, still presents us with the matrix through which later elaborations of the concept are to be understood.

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On the 14th of March 1956, a group of researchers gathered in one of the main conference halls of New York’s Columbia University. The group could pride itself on a rather eclectic membership. Among its ranks, figures ranged from Richard Hofstadter to Daniel Bell to Seymour Martin Lipset, congregating under the auspices of a topic named, rather vaguely, ‘The State’.¹ The outlook of the group was predictably interdisciplinary. Richard Hofstadter, for example, had been trained as a historian at City College, and was currently

writing a monograph on American radicalism, while, Daniel Bell, another participant, had been an exponent of Columbia’s sociology programme. In spite of these professional divergences, the participants of the seminar had a lot to talk about. In the months ranging from January 1952 to August 1953, the group discussed such heteroclite themes as “The Jews in American Politics” (Nathan Glazer), “A Comparison of the Functional and Processual Approaches to the Analysis of Social Movements” (Daniel Bell), and “Industrial Democracy and the British Labor Movement” (Kenneth Schell) (The later membership of the group, including figures such as Daniel Lerner, David Apter, and D.A. Rustow, indeed reads as a who’s who of early 1960s modernization theory).3

The topic discussed on the 14th of March, however, exerted considerable contemporaneity to most attendees. Discussion was to be led by Daniel Bell on the topic of “The New American Right”, basing himself on a book that he had published conjointly with another seminar member, Richard Hofstadter. The Radical Right, as the mentioned monograph was called, sought to investigate the social roots of McCarthyism in the United States; during the meeting, the attendants discussed the analytical framework used by the researchers to describe the rise of Senator McCarthy, referring to concepts such as ‘status anxiety’, ‘symbolism’, ‘scape-goat’, ‘structure’, and ‘function.’4

Richard Hofstadter, of course, had prior reasons for discussing the topic. In 1955, his The Age of Reform had first appeared, which offered a ‘revisionist’ assessment of the original ‘Populist’ movement in the late nineteenth century United States. As such, Hofstadter’s debut set itself a grand aim. It was to combat some of the most arduous and long-lasting assumptions of academic history as practiced by the Progressive School of Turner, Hicks and Beard,
whose influence within the American academe was as titanic as ever.\textsuperscript{5} Hofstadter contrasted the Populist ‘Agrarian Myth’ with the ‘Commercial Realities’ of the late-nineteenth-century, accusing the Populist farmers of posing as an endangered yeomanry for the sake of winning over American public opinion, while being in reality mere crypto-capitalists, utterly enmeshed in the ‘business society’ which they themselves claimed to criticise so vocally.\textsuperscript{6} Their hatred of processes of financialisation and corporate capitalism could, in Hofstadter’s purview, better be explained out of a fear of losing status, rather than a steep decline in living standards.\textsuperscript{7} Above all, Hofstadter connected Populist status anxiety to his contemporary times by way of McCarthyism: the ‘paranoid style of American politics’, as exemplified by the Wisconsin Senator McCarthy, showed a great contiguity with the paranoid rhetoric of the nineteenth-century Populists, who had an equal inclination towards ‘conspiratorial’ thinking in his view.\textsuperscript{8}

Hofstadter’s treatments of Populism saw critical assay during the course of 1970s, when writers such as Lawrence Goodwyn and Robert McMath contested many of the revisionist findings, seeking to offer a more nuanced picture of the agrarian radicals. On a global scale, however, the revisionist thesis proved to be highly resilient. Hofstadter’s understanding of ‘small-p’ populism as an implicit synonym for ‘proto-fascism’ was immensely influential in Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, where, in the global spread of modernization theory through the Western academe, ‘populism’ quickly became a passe-partout term denoting the thwarted democratic hopes of undeveloped nations.

The topic discussed in the Seminar on the State in 1956, therefore, had considerable repercussions for later European theorisations of the term.


\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., pp.33-34.
Originating in the seminar rooms of the Upper West Side Kibbutz (as Daniel Bell named the seminar group), and theorised during one of the most fruitful episodes of American intellectual history, anno 1956 the concept of ‘populism’ was due to set out on an international journey quite unlike any other. Although dismissed by Hofstadter’s counter-revisionist critics as analytically dubious, the definition given to the word by the attendants of the Seminar on the State gave it highly flexible applicability in other intellectual fields. In 1960, Seymour Martin Lipset published his Political Man, in which he made generous use of the word. In the book, ‘populism’ served to denote a so-called ‘radicalism of the centre’ as a descriptive instrument for the ‘processes of modernization’ he had discussed in the Columbia seminar room.\(^9\) In another 1965 classic of modernization theory, political scientist David Apter used the term to denote the crisis of political expectation that the intrusion of the masses into the arena of mass politics brought about. In 1962, Gino Germani, a co-operator of Talcott Parsons at Harvard, deployed it to describe non-class-based patterns of social mobilisation in Latin America.\(^10\) Hailing from Harvard’s Department of Social Relations and a long appendix of American political science faculties, scholars of modernization canonised previous versions of their theses in scholarly curricula and, through exchange programs and workshops, exported them to non-European spheres. Predictably, they thereby also contributed to the wider propagation of their conceptual vocabulary. Expressions such as ‘transitional stage’, ‘status’, ‘adaptation’, ‘anomie’, and ‘mass politics’ were now becoming familiar terms within European political science programs, constituting the global rise of what

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The most enthusiastic supporters of the pluralistic conception of ‘populism’ as a symptom of unfinished processes of modernization, however, were to be found in South America. When Latin American social scientists observed deviations from the classical pattern of historical development as to European cases, they turned to alternatives for the economism of Marxist approaches. Drawing on the theses issued by Lipset in his \textit{Political Man} – which had first theorised a global morphology of ‘populism’ as a result of ‘social strains’ – the ascription of the word to phenomena such as Argentinian Peronism seemed to them more fruitful than Marxian approaches.

In the case of a writer such as Gino Germani, such an engagement with the topic of ‘populism’ was foremost an extra-academic matter. Born in Rome in 1911, Germani had witnessed both the rise of fascism in its Italian and German forms, emigrating to Argentina in the mid-1930s.\footnote{See Barbara Celarent, 'Review: Authoritarianism, Fascism and National-Populism by Gino Germani' in \textit{Journal of Sociology} 2 (September 2013), pp. 591-592 and Gino Germani, ‘Introduction’ in \textit{Authoritarianism, Fascism and National-Populism} (New Jersey, Transaction Books: 1978), pp. vii-xi, pp.51-52; Daniel Rawicz, ‘Gino Germani: Socialismo liberal y sociologia científica’, in \textit{Andamios} 19 (May-August 2012), pp.236-238; Torcuato Di Tella, ‘Gino Germani: 1911-1979’, in \textit{Desarrollo económico} 19 (July-September 1979), 275-277.} Hoping to escape the tumultuous politics of pre-bellum Europe, Germani found himself in continuing turmoil with the ascent of Argentinian Peronism in 1943. Germani was deeply troubled by the appearance of fascism on non-European soil, and his academic work sought to provide cogent analytic bases for a sociology of
‘left-wing fascism’ in its Argentinian form without succumbing to the lures of economic reductionism.¹³

And thus he did. After a sojourn at Harvard’s Department of Social Relations in the mid-1960s, his immersion into the pluralist political science first coined in the Seminar on the State provided him with the necessary tools to exegete Peronism. He saw in Peron an ideological combination of both romanticism and modernism – in modernist dialects, this showed an ‘asynchronism’ of development which could be seen as a symptom ‘disease of the transition’ other modernization-theorists had discerned in upcoming nations. ‘Populism’, in Germani’s opinion, denoted a social configuration in which a change in the social status of the lower classes had not been met with an equal transformation in their economic habits.¹⁴ He took the example of lower class consumption habits, contending that, although consumption had increased prodigiously before the years of the Peronist regime, an equal intensification in productive capacity on behalf of the Argentinian working class had not taken place. A structural asymmetry between the democratic expectations and realities was therefore borne out.¹⁵

Additionally, Germani’s explanation of Peronism emphasised the extent to which ‘asynchronisms’ in development were foremost due to the penetration of previously unknown social constituents into the political arena.¹⁶ Germani stated that the increasing influx of European immigrant workers had resulted in a general state of disequilibrium. The expectations of an agitated working class could not be met by the residing national bourgeoisie, who thereby contributed to the rise of an anti-elitist ideology. As such, populist mobilisation could not be slotted into a left-right pattern, and mainly relied on

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¹³ The expression of ‘left-wing’ fascism was first theorised by Lipset in Political Man. See Lipset, Political Man, p.144.
charismatic authority and what Germani, following the pluralists, called ‘status incongruences’.\(^{17}\)

Germani’s own theorisations, circling in the wider orbit of global modernization theory, were met with several local responses. During the course of the 1960s, Latin American academics such as Torcuato Di Tella and Francisco Weffort questioned his theses on the non-class character of Peronism. Others doubted whether the non-class approach favored by Germani could explain the deeply class-conscious nature of most of the Peronist following, who seemed to have adopted a Marxist language to describe their enemies.\(^{18}\) The neo-functionalist accounts of populism as ‘subjective politics’ reminiscent of Parsonian action theory and Hofstadter’s status revolt, seemed to them equally guilty of reductionist inclinations. Yet they did accept his initial diagnosis of ‘populism’ as non-class based. By conceding to Germani’s categorisation, the substructure of the pluralist concept remained intact: populism was defined as ‘an ideology based on the satisfaction of the demands of the popular masses’, coupled with ‘the valorization of their style of life.’\(^{19}\)

The voyage of the concept thus catapulted Hofstadter’s concept into a position that Hofstadter’s critics did not dare imagine. In the visions of the modernization theorists, the concept quickly shed its prior association with the McCarthyite revolt. Looking back at the travels of pluralists such as Lipset and Shils, who seemed untroubled by counter-revisionist warnings, several American historians readings found themselves in amazement over the overstretch to which the tool of ‘small-p’ populism was now being subjected. During the course of the 1960s, modernization theory contributed to the swift

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\(^{17}\) Germani, \(Politica\ y\ sociedad\), pp.169-194.

\(^{18}\) See Torcuato Di Tella, ‘A Model for Political Change in Latin America’, in \(Social\ Science\ Information\) 7 (1968), 13-48; E. Spencer Wellhofer, ‘Peronism in Argentina and the Social Bases for the Fist Regime’, in \(The\ Journal\ of\ Developing\ Areas\) 11 (April 1977), 335-356; Torcuato Di Tella, ‘Populismo y reforma’, pp.394-398; Francisco Weffort, ‘Classes sociales y desarrollo social’, in A. Quijana and Francisco Weffort \(Populismo, marginalidad y dependencia\) (Costa Rica: Press, 1973). See also the edited volume, Gino Germani, Torcuato Di Tella and Octavio Ianni, \(Populismo\ y\ contradicciones\ de\ clase\ en\ Latinoamerica\) (Mexico City: Serie Popular Era, 1973). As expected, the debate on the veritable nature of the social bases of Peronism has not wavered since the 1970s, and a scholarly consensus on whether Argentinian Peronism (or Brazilian ‘Vargasianism’, for that matter) are to be classified as ‘populist’ has not been reached yet.

\(^{19}\) Di Tella, ‘A Model’, p.29.
integration of the term into varying political traditions as the synonym for ‘plebiscitarianism’ and ‘direct democracy’, while Edward Shils’ characterisation of ‘populism’ as ‘democracy without the rule of law’ now found its exponents in treatments of emerging African, Indochinese and Latin American social movements.

Nowhere was this extensiveness clearer than in the most famous instance of ‘populist’ theorizing in the post-war period: the 1968 conference on the topic organized at the London School of Economics. Gathered around by organisers Ernest Gellner and Ghita Ionescu, a wide variety of researchers here congregated for the sake of intellectual enlightenment. Papers on the topic of ‘populism’ were distributed beforehand, featuring a long list of eminent social scientists, economists, sociologists and historians of differing plumage. Chairman Leonard Schapiro – himself based at the LSE – presented his task as a ‘work of instant research’. After having delegated academic tasks to all attendants, Schapiro proposed three questions which were to serve as professional guidelines for discussions: ‘what is and what is not populist ideology?’, ‘why is populism a political movement and yet does it not usually crystallise in political parties?’, and, finally, ‘what are the differences between the populism of before the First World War and after the Second World War?’.

From the outset, participants could be divided into two camps as to how one ought to classify the lexical expansions of the term: ‘lumpers’ versus ‘splitters’. The inquiry was initiated by Slavic scholars such as Andrej Walicki and Hugh Seton-Watson, who proposed early equation of ‘populism’ as a generic form of ‘peasantism’. However, since many Latin American populist movements displayed no traces of a rural focus, as contributor Alain Touraine noted, such an equation was quickly dispensed with. Moving on to a new definition of populism as defined by ‘non-class based’ mass-politics, participants now

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20 A list of all the participants can be found in Isaiah Berlin, ‘To define populism’, in Government and Opposition 8 (1968), p.137.
22 Ibid., p.3-4.
sought the potential analytic grip of a ‘modernist’ theory of populism as an asynchronism of development. Since populism, as political scientist Donald MacRae noted, could not only be theorised as an ideology, but must equally be seen as a strategy for political mobilisation and political change, a more ‘loose’ definition of populism as anti-elitism now seemed to bring succour. Yet quickly the elusiveness of such a definition seemed imminent. Both Franco Venturi and Peter Worsley objected to a formalistic understanding of the term, opting for a more local and historically bracketed approach. When extensive discussions failed to give any conclusive evidence on the lexical properties of the term, participants adjourned an afternoon session in which American scholars were given tribune.

Scholars on the other side of the Atlantic joined hesitantly. Richard Hofstadter found himself slightly dazzled by the wide range of movements and ideologies currently classified under the term, stating that he expected a conference discussing only two types of ‘populism’ either in its Russian or American form. Responding to his critics, Hofstadter now conceded that the ‘genetic affiliation’ of McCarthyism to ‘earlier agrarian movements’ was ‘doubtless miscarried’. Even if the John Birchers and other ‘paranoid style’ exponents did ‘twang some populist strings’, they now no longer qualified for the status of ‘substantial’ Populists. In a digressive note, Hofstadter still saw ‘small-p populism’ as essentially concerned with status rather than economic grievances, stating that certain ‘populist’ leaders within the Civil Rights Movement drew on the ‘serious trauma about identity’ of the African-American population.

Finishing a long day of semantic winnowing, Isaiah Berlin took on the task of summarising the results. ‘We must not suffer from a ‘Cinderella Complex’ Berlin remarked ‘that there exists a shoe – the word ‘populism’ – for which

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25 Ibid., p.175.
26 Ibid., p.53-55.
27 Ibid., p.57.
28 Ibid., p.60.
29 Ibid., p.61.
somewhere there must exist a foot... There are all kinds of feet which it nearly
fits, but we must not be trapped by these nearly fitting feet.'\(^\text{31}\) ‘I have a feeling’ Berlin also put forward ‘that whenever a word is much used... something real is intended. Something, not quite nothing. There is a sense in which one should look for the common core.’\(^\text{32}\) Berlin noted, ‘populism cannot be a consciously minority movement. Whether falsely or truly, it stands for the majority of man.’\(^\text{33}\)

The reception of pluralistic populism in Europe can thus hardly be said to have met with general acquiescence. Most researchers present at the conference – many of them already well-established academics, often looking back at considerable professional careers – were aware of the elasticity of the concept, and sought to present a more probable analytical framework for it. Going over the uncountable list of criteria proposed by the participants, Donald MacFarlane saw no possibility of uniting all of them into a coherent circuit. ‘We have to be aware’ he stated, ‘of the danger of giving populism a label which can apply to everything, so that we have to spend all our time trying to find different brands of populism, just as there are different brands of soap powder in the shops.’\(^\text{34}\)

Unsurprisingly, the results of the conference were quickly met with American responses. In 1970, Theodor Saloutos, a participant in revisionist controversy in early 1960s, even deemed the results of the conference wholly unsuitable for academic inquiry. ‘Why two editors’ Saloutos wondered acrimoniously, ‘should attempt anything as sweeping and premature as this study defies explanation.’\(^\text{35}\) ‘The inability of the writers’ decried Saloutos ‘to come up with any acceptable definition of populism simply confounds the reader.’\(^\text{36}\) What remained, according to him, was a ‘maze of phraseologies’, lacking the

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\(^{32}\) Ibid., p.7.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., p.141.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., p.25.


\(^{36}\) Ibid., p.328.
willingness to do ‘the necessary empirical digging.’ Although the idea behind the book ‘had merit’, in his view, Saloutos contended that

The limited and superficial treatment given to sweeping topics hardly does justice to them, the collaborators, and the publishers. The term “populism” is misused and abused, in the opinion of the reviewer; setting up a qualified definition of it would have given the volume a sense of cohesion. But as it now stands it lacks focus, it is amorphous and cluttered with a mass of undigested data that prompt one to label it a serious mistake. And even this is a charitable evaluation.

Contrary to scholarly expectations, the intellectual heritage of the conference remained positively ambiguous – a fact corroborated by the reliance of later academics on the theses issued in the book based on the conference. Despite participator Peter Worsley’s reminder that ascriptions of ‘populism’ to particular social movements were by no means ‘self-evidently justifiable’, the link established between the concept and a whole array of political phenomena would prove hard to sever. The conference constituted, as a later English critic caustically remarked, a ‘tour de force of academic diplomacy’. Unwittingly, American pluralists had burdened their European counterparts with the difficult task of ‘impressionistically’ pinning down the taxonomy of an elusive, ‘chameleonic’ beast. Since later European researchers had always to take in account the ascriptions of prior intellectual explications, the slide into semantic oblivion seemed to some scholars inevitable. By the late 1970s, a ‘populist nihilism’ was quickly creeping into debates on the term, with an increasing number of researchers now calling for a moratorium on the

38 Ibid., p.329.
very use of it. In 1977, Ernesto Laclau lamented over these alleged ‘populist nihilists’, or, theorists who thought that the very task of trying to define ‘populism’ was a misguided endeavour, because the word was used for such a wide a variety of political actors and movements. Since ‘populism’ had become such an omnipresent concept, and now saw even freer circulation in the channels of public opinion, the nihilists’ calls were impossible to follow.

Going into the 1980s, the pluralist heritage again proved to be highly recalcitrant in academic contexts. In the 1980s, French political scientists began to using the term ‘populist’ to describe the rising National Front, which until then had usually been classified as ‘extreme right’ or ‘poujadist’. As such, the original Populist ideal, above all, in its American versions, quickly came to be buried under a century of ideology, and it now appears an increasingly arduous task to inform readers that ‘populism’ once meant something more than ‘demagoguery’ and ‘proto-fascism’ – particularly in European conversations. Here, Hofstadter still is very much with us, hovering over contemporary discussion on ‘European populism’ with Faustian bravado. A book by Princeton professor Jan-Werner Müller entitled What is Populism? boldly declares that ‘populism’ is not only anti-elitist, but also anti-democratic; anti-pluralist, and moralistic, all in extremely dangerous ways:

The core claim of populism is thus a moralized form of antipluralism... Populism requires a pars pro toto argument and a claim to exclusive representation, with both understood in a moral, as opposed to empirical, sense. There can be no populism, in other words, without someone speaking in the name of the people as a whole.


Perhaps the most interesting features of Müller’s book come to the fore when one compares his definitions with the ones presented by his pluralist predecessors in the 1950s. Here, for comparison, is Edward Shils’ definition of populism, written in the midst of the McCarthy-episode in 1955, written approximately 60 years before Müller:

Populism proclaims that the will of the people as such is supreme over every other standard, over the standards of traditional institutions, over the autonomy of institutions and over the will of other strata. Populism identifies the will of the people with justice and morality.46

It seems that, even after many a summer, the Hofstadterian swan just won’t die. The weirdly ahistorical state of current populism-studies mirrors the decontextualised treatment the term often receives in public commentary. Jean-Claude Juncker and Donald Tusk now jointly proclaim their existential commitment to a united Europe under the banner of an oecumenical ‘anti-populism’. As such, they are still partly drawing on a habit that was inaugurated over 60 years ago, in a small Columbia seminar room – a monument, perhaps, to the power ideas exert in the historical process.

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