

POPULIST EPISTEMOLOGY: IDENTITY AND MOBILIZATION IN MODERN DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

According to Panizza, the analytical core of populism has three elements: a mode of identification, a process of naming and a dimension of politics. Populism is a mode of identification available to any political actor operating in a discursive field in which the notions of the sovereignty of the people and its inevitable corollary, the conflict between the powerful and powerless, are core elements of its political imaginary. It is a political appeal that seeks to change the term of political discourse, articulate new social relations, redefine political frontiers and constitute new identities. Populist identity emerges out of the dislocation of the specific identities of particularistic demands – neighbours, workers, peasant, the unemployed, women, ethnic groups, etc – and their reconstitution in the imaginary unity of the people. The image of a chain of unfulfilled demands implies the notion of politically mobilised actors advancing their demands against a political system that is unwilling or unable to address them. This type of chain is called by Laclau as the ‘chain of equivalences’ and Canovan says about it as similar to Wittgenstein’s concept of ‘family resemblances’. Populist movement is not only a farmers’ agrarian movement but also has a prominent political aspect as a grass-root revolt against the elite or plutocrats, corrupt politicians. It is to cover many and various movements as recognition of this particular character of political ideals in the modern world. Populist identities can lead to the atomisation of social identities and a collapse of all relations of representation. Populist politics changes the aspects of reality at the level of the economy, culture, and society, through the processes of urbanisation and economic modernisation.

Keyword: Populism, Identity, Chain of equivalence, Family resemblance, people

INTRODUCTION

The word populism is being used for many political phenomena. The issue of populism calls on us to reconsider the concept of ‘people’. In this regard there is a long history of attempted achievements and failed ideas that

comes from far back and arrives to the present day. In 1870s Russia, a key word was *narodnicestvo*, which derives from the Russian expression ‘going to the people’ and was used as a label for a group of intellectuals who are rediscovering the peasantry. In the 1880s in the United States, populism is the movement which gave rise to the people’s party, which also signalled a conflict between the countryside and the metropolitan –specifically farmers. In the mid-twentieth century in Latin America, especially in Peron’s Argentina, it meant a shift from the rural to the urban areas with an attention to the more disadvantaged social groups, but with a national and authoritarian bend. There is one key feature that radically distinguishes historical from contemporary forms of populism – a conflictual relationship with the dominant reality. While in the past, populism was against development, now it is against stagnation. Its target today is the elites who wield full control of the economic and financial system, especially of the political and institutional system. Historically, the various populist movements had the objective of turning back the clock of time, or at least of stopping it in its course, demanding a return to tradition, national and popular. Today’s populist ideologies tend to move with times, to embrace innovation and modernisation. They represent a degenerated form of newism, they want to make a clean slate of all the past and they demand a new beginning (Giusto 2013: 15-24).

POPULISM AND IDENTITY

According to Panizza, the analytical core of populism has three elements: a mode of identification, a process of naming and a dimension of politics. Populism is a mode of identification available to any political actor operating in a discursive field in which the notion of the sovereignty of the people and its inevitable corollary, the conflict between the powerful and powerless, are core element of its political imaginary. The core aspect of populism is its focus on ‘the people’. Populist movements attempt to create a direct connection between the people and the political power, bypassing the electoral process. Populism is based on the constitution of the people as a political actor. In modern politics almost every political speech appeals to the people or claims to speak for the people. Populism invokes itself and mobilizes itself politically at times in the name of the people (Panniza 2005: 1-5). According to Laclau, “the Political becomes synonymous with populism..., since the construction of the ‘people’ is the political act par excellence” (Laclau 2005:154). Paul Taggart says about “The populist conception of ‘the people’ is a fundamentally monolithic. ‘The people’ are portrayed as a unity. They are seen as a single entity devoid of fundamental divisions and unified and solidaristic. ‘The people’ are, in populist thinking, already fully formed and self-aware. It is this feature that makes them such easy subjects. Reference to ‘the people’ is easily made and readily understood” (Taggart, 2002:92).

Populism is always a form of identity politics, and all varieties of identity politics are not populist. The processes of identification can be illustrated by the events of World Trade Centre attack September 11, 2001. The inhabitants of the United State are deeply fragmented by race, class, gender, religion and other markers of identity. But people of different opinions and identities identified themselves as Americans. In this time, President Bush erased all internal differences among the United State people and constituted them into a collective United State against a Terrorist other. This is the normative value implicit in the actual naming of ‘them’ as the terrorists. In the process of naming – Bush did not create an American people, but there was an American identity before September 11. Populism refers to the mode identification rather than to individuals or parties. Personal identity cannot be separated from collective identity. Personal identity is thus not less social than collective identity (Panniza 2005: 6-9).

POPULISM AND EQUIVALENCE LOGIC

Populism is a political appeal that seeks to change the term of political discourse, articulate new social relations, redefine political frontiers and constitute new identities. Populist identity emerges out of the dislocation of the specific identities of particularistic demands – neighbours, workers, peasant, unemployed, women, ethnic groups, etc – and their reconstitution in the imaginary unity of the people. The image of a chain of unfulfilled demands implies the notion of politically mobilised actors advancing their demands against a political system that is unwilling or unable to address them. Laclau gives an example “Think of a large mass of agrarian migrants who settle in the shanty towns on the outskirts of a developing industrial city. Problems of housing arise, and the group of people affected by them request some kind of solution from the local authorities. Here we have a demand which initially is perhaps only a request. If the demand is satisfied, that is the end of the matter, but if it is not, people can start to perceive that their neighbours have other, equally unsatisfied demand – problems with water, health, schooling, and so on. 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” (Laclau 2005: 73). This chain of unfulfilled demands constitutes what Laclau calls as ‘chain of equivalences’ and Canovan identifies it as similar to Wittgenstein’s ‘family resemblances’. According to Wittgenstein, “I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblance”; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. – And I shall say: “games” form a family” (Wittgenstein 1958: 67). It argues that things which could be thought to be connected by one essential common feature may in fact be connected by a series of overlapping similarities, where no one feature is common to all. Games, which Wittgenstein used as an example to explain the

notion, have become the paradigmatic example of a group that is related by family resemblance. Populism is itself like a ‘family resemblance’. All the unfulfilled demands of diverse groups make a movement.

Laclau suggests the preconditions of populism as follows --- (1) the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating the ‘people’ from power; and (2) an equivalential articulation of demands making the emergence of the ‘people’ possible. He also said about two types of logic in common – social logic of difference and logic of equivalence. The emergence of populism is both difference and equivalence to reflect themselves into each other. The differential logic would be accepted as a legitimate way of constructing the social. In this society, conceived as a continuously expanding system, any social need should be met differentially. Laclau describes that “populism requires the dichotomic division of society into two camps – one presenting itself as a part which claims to be the whole; that this dichotomy involves that antagonistic division of the social field; and the popular camp presupposes, as a condition of its constitution, the construction of a global identity out of the equivalence of a plurality of social demands”. This is the particular articulation of equivalence and difference that makes the ‘popular identity’ (Laclau 2005: 83).

MODERNITY AND POPULIST POLITICS

Populist movement is not only an agrarian movement but also have a prominent political aspect as a grass-root revolt against the elite or plutocrats, corrupt politicians. It is to cover many and various movements as recognition of this particular character of political ideals in the modern world. Populism is a particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets morally pure and fully unified. It is ultimately fictional – people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior. It is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to be critical of elites in order to qualify as a populist. Anyone criticizing the powerful and the status quo in any country would by definition be a populist. Populist are always antipluralist, they claim that they, and only they, represent the people. Other political competitors are just part of the immoral, corrupt elites. So populist say, while not having power themselves when in government, they will not recognize anything like a legitimate opposition. The populist core claim also implies that whoever does not really support populist parties might not be part of the proper people to begin with. In the word of the French philosopher Claude Lefort, the supposedly real people first have to be ‘extracted’ from the sum total of actual citizens. This ideal people are then presumed to be morally pure and unerring in its will (Muller 2016: 11-17).

Populist identities can lead to the atomisation of social identities and a collapse of all relations of representation. It is not just about a crisis of representation in which people are weaned off their old identities and embrace a new

‘popular’ one. It is also about the beginning of representation, allowing those who have never been represented because of their class, religion, ethnicity or geographical location, to be acknowledged as political actors. Populist leaders appeal to both the never-enfranchised and the newly disenfranchised, but there is no populist leadership unless there is a successful constitution of new identities and of a representative link with those identities. In both cases, the new relations of representation become possible because of dislocations of the existing political order (Panniza 2005: 11-12).

Populist politics changes the aspects of reality at the level of the economy, culture, and society, through the processes of urbanisation and economic modernisation, demographical balance among social classes, regional and ethnic groups, as well as globalisation. Social turmoil and social mobility alter established identities, loose traditional relations of subordination and open up new forms of identification. Not by chance were the 1930s and 1990s characterised by a flourishing of populist politics in Latin America, since these decades saw radical transformations in the region’s models of development. In 1930s Argentina, a new working class composed of migrants from the rural provinces to the new industries in cities such as Buenos Aires and Rosario became the social base of Peronism in the 1940s. A similar process took place in Brazil over the same period. In the 1990s, economic liberalisation went hand in hand with populist politics in a number of Latin America countries, including Argentina, Brazil, and Peru (Panniza 2005: 13).

Populist politics are also linked to the emergence of forms of political representation outside traditional political institutions. The emergence of the radio as a form of mass communication is associated with the first wave of populist leaders in Latin America and elsewhere. In Brazil Getulio Vargas used a radio programme, ‘*A Voz do Brazil*’, broadcast daily by a national network of radio stations, to appeal to the Brazilian people in a country that had very few means of national integration at the time. In recent time, Ross Perot’s hugely successful ‘infomercials’ show that the mass media is also a powerful vehicle for populist politics in a country of continental size such as the United States. In Europe, the rise of *Pim Fortuyn* in Holland is linked to his popularity as a TV social commentator.

CONCLUSION

In the world history, Asia, Africa and Latin America who were the victims of colonial exploitation in the past, are still characterized by a low level of economic and political development as compared to industrially advanced nations of the world. They have adopted different types of constitutions, including the Western type or socialist type, in order to cope with the problems of national-building and economic development. Populist politics gave a

new dimension to the diverse people and their aspirations of nation. Political mobilization is the result of some social changes. Social changes encourage political mobilization. Its success depends on the political organization and the influence of individuals and other factors. It is also influenced by ideologies. It results in the evolution of party system. It is a step in the process of nation building.

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