RESEARCH ARTICLE

MAJOR DIRECTIONS IN POPULISM STUDIES: IS THERE ROOM FOR CULTURE?

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ABSTRACT: The article highlights the absence of a cultural dimension in the academic literature of popu-
lism and advocates in favor of studying grassroots social movements as the primary milieu where culture
interacts with populist mobilization. Beginning with an original classification of existing schools of thought
on populism that uses the historical figure of William Jennings Bryan as a conceptual yardstick, it moves on
to lay out a framework for cultural analysis through the lens of collective action frame theory, based on an
understanding of populism as a discursive mode of political identification.

KEYWORDS: populism, populist social movements, discourse, culture, collective action framing

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1. Introduction

Up until some years ago, research on populism constituted a rather esoteric and iso-
lated subfield of political science associated with flamboyant presidents in the global
periphery or with raucous but politically inconsequential figures in "core" Western na-
tions. The aura of aberrance that accompanied the term had allowed several main-
streams scholars to prematurely declare countries such as the United States, the Unit-
ed Kingdom, Germany, Sweden, and Spain virtually immune to the populist challenge,

either due to the structural, "centripetal" advantages of their party systems or because of one appeasing feature of their domestic political culture or another.

While this illusion lasted – for roughly twenty-five years after the end of the Cold War – populists were "othered" bimodally, with the Atlantic Ocean erecting an insurmountable border of analytical disunity when it came to grasping the "true" empirical expression of the phenomenon. Specialists of the Western hemisphere heard "populism" and turned to the disturbing electoral advances of the Latin American left, with Venezuela's Hugo Chavez holding the banner for the "pink tide." Europeanists responded to the same cue by turning to the opposite side of the political spectrum, putting the fledgling – but still electorally feeble – radical right in Western Europe in their crosshairs, with France's Jean-Marie Le Pen serving as *bête noire*.

Conceit was replaced by trepidation when the two nations traditionally advertised as stalwart stewards of liberal democracy and role models for the developing world were shaken by major and largely unanticipated populist gains. Donald Trump won the 2016 United States election, and the Brexit referendum upended the political landscape in the United Kingdom, ushering Boris Johnson into power. Moreover, anti-immigrant parties in countries such as Germany, Italy, Spain, France, Sweden, and Austria, greatly improved their electoral fortunes in the wake of the Syrian refugee crisis. Adding insult to injury, radical left parties in Greece and Spain made headway during the Eurozone crisis, gnawing further into the ailing liberal consensus among conservatives and social democrats.

Eventually, after enough influential pundits had employed the term "populism" to encapsulate this unprecedented affront to mainstream politics, academics followed suit, thus significantly expanding the concept's empirical application. All of a sudden, populism researchers gained popularity with academic publishers, journal editors, and lay opinion makers, and the ensuing barrage of scholarly production contributed reams of published material atop an already weighty body of work. Yet, quantity came at the expense of conceptual clarity. Even had the idea of a consensus on populism's conceptual perimeter not already been *de rigeur* prior to 2015, to try and tame a scholarship running amok to incorporate a flurry of new empirical instances seems today utterly preposterous.

Fresh cohorts of zealous Ph.D. students just beginning to delve into populism's conceptual depths are understandably throwing up their hands in dismay with this state of affairs. For the reasons just outlined, it would however be dishonest to profess the existence of a concise and universally accepted "authoritative" theory of populism that could alleviate such anxieties. Coming to terms with this absence by attempting at least to clear some of the dust produced by the warring camps in the field seems like a more

viable undertaking. To serve this modest goal, I here suggest that instead of the usual, inductive route followed by most literature reviewers, we take a path of inquiry that is somewhat circuitous but at the same time offers better intuition and a sounder organizing principle, all the while remaining grounded to the concept's historical origins.[1] I thus aim to avoid the danger of falling victim to a circumstantial appreciation of populist dynamics that will expire as soon as the current political setting changes and pundits switch to a different specter of choice *in lieu* of populism.

My deductive approach is based on summoning the figure of William Jennings Bryan to be used as a basis for conceptual work. Revisiting Populism's historical inception in the 1890s, I draw on existing literature to elicit tacit reactions for the widespread conviction that Bryan represents the first and most iconic populist contender. I aim to show that by studying how current schools of thought on populism are forced to cater for this archetypal case we can deduce where these schools stem from, how their epistemologies were shaped to respond to pressing empirical developments, and why they seem to be in such permanent tension with each other.

Providing a useful taxonomy for the academic literature on populism constitutes the first goal of the article. The second is to contribute to a deepening of this literature's analytical potential by promoting cultural approaches to the study of populist mobilization. While not denying the importance of culture at the level of party politics, I contend that scholars should primarily focus on exploring the interplay of populism and culture in the field of social mobilization. Grassroots forms of political contention routinely rely on cultural cues to construct populist collective action frames that will resonate with citizens, a mechanism that practitioners of the field have so far failed to give proper attention. I suggest that by wedding a theory of populism as a discursively constructed mode of political identification with methods from frame analysis as practiced in the field of social movement studies, we can address this lacuna and move toward incorporating culture into the analysis of populist phenomena.

2. Why was William Jennings Bryan a populist?

Despite its etymological roots in Latin, populism is a thoroughly American word, coined in the 1890s as a catchy neologism, a moniker first used for the members and supporters of the United States People's Party in the absence of an official partisan

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[1] For recent surveys of the field, see Abromeit (2017); Moffitt (2016), pp. 17-27; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), pp. 2-9; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2018); Rooduijn (2019); Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (2017); Woods (2014).

designation. Derided as a bunch of cranks and radicals by both Democrats and Republicans, the People's Party arose from the experience of the agrarian movement of the Farmers' Alliances in the South and Midwest whose numerous members decided to cease relying on lobbying the two major parties for redress. Based on a radically progressive platform, they opted instead to establish a third party to contest elections at the local, state, and federal level (Goodwyn 1976; Hicks 1931; Hofstadter 1955; Postel 2007).

It has now become commonplace in handbooks and literature reviews to refer to the People's Party as the first populist movement in history, yet researchers rarely go beyond a hurried recognition to delve into the voluminous scholarship on this most fascinating episode. It is only die-hard experts of (capital-P) Populism who can readily summon up the names of the party's first senators or its nominees for the 1892 Presidential election. The one name that instinctively comes to most minds is that of William Jennings Bryan, the archetypal populist orator who was the Democratic candidate for president in 1896 while also enjoying the parallel endorsement of the Populists. Bryan crisscrossed the country to deliver fiery oratories, but his eventual defeat sealed the fate of the People's Party and the wider Populist cause. Nevertheless, his passionate "Cross of Gold" speech at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in July 1896 has gone down in history as perhaps the most representative populist speech ever delivered by a major party presidential nominee.

Interestingly, there are several issues with a knee-jerk association of Populism with the figure of Bryan, especially when taking into account the conceptual dimensions of populism as we understand them today. This bright, eloquent, well-connected, and well-educated Nebraskan – son of a senator and judge – was not the political maverick one would assume. In fact, he was just thirty years old when first elected to the House of Representatives in 1890, and that was not with any obscure political organization but with the oldest political party in the country, the Democratic Party itself. Bryan was subsequently nominated three times for president in 1896, 1900, and 1908, but he lost every time, ultimately serving as President Woodrow Wilson's Secretary of State from 1913 to 1915.

On the other hand, Bryan's Republican nemesis in the first two elections, William McKinley, was a devout Protestant of humble rural origins, the son of a pig-iron manufacturer who never graduated from college. McKinley first campaigned for nomination under the motto "McKinley against the bosses" (Klinghard 2005). He was a resolute advocate of the protective tariff and he proudly proclaimed to have founded his political economy more "upon the everyday experience of the puddler or the potter than the learning of the professor" (quoted in Glad 1964, 23-24). Based on these outward ap-

pearances, one could draw the conclusion that McKinley fits the populist bill better. Yet it is Bryan, the "Great Commoner", who is most frequently invoked as the earliest and quintessential populist political leader. Technically though, Bryan spent his whole life as a dedicated Democrat. He never enlisted in the People's Party, the "official" Populists of the era, even after they chose him for their 1896 Presidential ticket. Bryan's lack of genuine Populist credentials was not lost on his enemies within the People's Party though, and his nomination in 1896 was only a matter of strategic consideration in the face of the party's dwindling electoral prospects. Even so, the fateful decision to support the Democratic candidate did not go uncontested, as anti-fusionist Populists angrily branded Bryan "an enemy to the People's Party" (Argesinger 1974, 199), declaring his platform to be a selective cooptation of their own and his nomination to be a betrayal of Populist ideals. Why, then, do we take for granted that Bryan was the "real" populist and McKinley simply another Republican?

It is this very question that could serve as the basis upon which criteria for a populist litmus test can be articulated, thereby conditioning the inclusion of various parties and leaders into the populist set. Was Bryan a populist or not, and why? If yes, which specific dimensions of our theoretical framework allow us to recognize him as such? If not, how do we justify excluding such a widely perceived ideal-typical case (cf. Goertz 2006)?

Schematically, I suggest grouping plausible answers under three main categories. First, in the same way we would use "Republican" as a partisan label in the American context, we can prioritize a strict requirement for party affiliation and instruct that populist identity is exclusively reserved for People's Party supporters and those with official positions within its formal apparatus. Secondly, resembling how we generically understand the terms "conservative" or "socialist", we can expand populism beyond the pre-established confines of the People's Party to further include politicians and other individuals whose political ideology corresponds to the Populist creed and its policy ramifications. The quest would then revolve around whether Bryan was a genuine populist ideologue at heart, irrespective of his nominal partisan identity. Finally, we can claim that official membership and political ideology are unable to capture the true spectrum of the phenomenon: there was something in Bryan's outward behavior – his rhetorical tropes, his personal style, his campaign gimmicks, etc. – so resembling of the Populist experience that it warrants adding him to the populist set.

The whole purpose of this admittedly heuristic exercise is to consult existing conceptual declarations with the aim of "brute-forcing" how scholars determine Bryan's populist status, and then to use these hypothetical answers as a compass for classification

purposes. In the next three sub-sections I will attempt to map out these orienting thoughts onto the existing literature.

2.1 Historicist and Structuralist Interpretations

Devoted historians of the People's Party will claim that the term "Populism" should always retain its capitalization in order to denote historical specificity. Populism existed as a singular, history-bound episode in American politics. It may have had consequences and implications, and subsequent movements may have superficially resembled it one way or another, but Populism reflected a unique worldview that cannot re-emerge outside the specific sociopolitical forces that produced it and determined its political trajectory. Populism was born within the Farmers' Alliances and died when the People's Party folded, and if Bryan deserves the label, it is solely by virtue of his historical role as the champion of the Populist cause in the eyes of American society. It is simply ahistorical, this school of thought maintains, to distill from American Populism such a thing as small-p populism to be affixed to sundry political phenomena in the United States or, worse, around the world. The contemporary application of "populism" is therefore an unacceptable abstraction, a Procrustean attempt by social scientists in pursuit of forced comparative operations.

This strict historicist rationale just summarized above is currently only espoused by a minority of researchers. However, it is not entirely indefensible, in that it is indeed reflective of the epistemological gulf separating the humanities from the comparative social sciences. Its value lies in presenting a cautious reminder of the dangers of haphazardly abstracting social-scientific concepts from rich and complex historical phenomena to then squeeze them into formal models of limited dimensionality.

Somewhat more influential and less draconian is a variant of the same family which contains useful traces of comparative potential. Again dear mostly to historians as well as a few sociologists and political scientists, this conceptual platform acknowledges the primacy of the Populist phenomenon while allowing room for other "populisms" that bear a resemblance to the original movement. On the one hand, close proximity to the main policy planks of the Omaha platform of 1892 can justify including a subsequent political phenomenon into the Populist tradition. On the other hand – and most importantly – the proper socio-historical context must be operative. Such "quasi-populisms" must involve agrarian populations facing hostile socio-structural conditions similar to those of their 1880s-90s American counterparts (the more similar, the better) in the context of a changing socioeconomic environment where industrialization

imposes a power shift away from traditional rural communities. Hence, the Russian Narodniki (Venturi 1960), the German Farmers League (Barkin 1970), the Polish Peasant Movement (Narkiewicz 1976), and the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (Bell 1977), would qualify for the populist family. However, one should not expect to find populism outside rural communities or in places where industrialization has already negated the political relevance of agrarian societies. Given such premises, it becomes unreasonable to insist on the existence of populist forces in modern, fully industrialized societies.[2]

A similar trail of thought is observed among the first generation of Latin American populism scholars and their few contemporary disciples. Here, however, the argument – though retaining its structural bias – is transformed with respect to the social agent of populist agitation. Certain characteristics of agrarian populism, such as the sensitivity to the disruptive force of industrialization, urbanization, and the general thrust of modernization, remain intact, but the usual victims – the agrarian populations of the hinterland – are substituted for urban dwellers in burgeoning national metropoles. Instead of the People's Party, early populist episodes in South America (basically, Peronism in the 1940s) are promoted to ideal-typical status. With references in functionalist sociology, modernization theory, and mass society theory, populism is seen as the outcome of a situation where certain sectors of society fail to keep up with the impact of rapid industrialization. This asymmetrical development, the "premature emergence of a mass society" (Hennessy 1969, 31), produces fissures in the structure of political representation of societal interests, thus allowing charismatic outsiders to attract the support of an amorphous mass of marginalized and disenfranchised urban citizens. Political leaders whose electoral ascendancy was conditioned by social forces of this nature qualify as populists.

These first three viewpoints, presented loosely above as members of the same school of thought, are characterized by a distinctly structural appreciation of historical progress. The focus is squarely on the macro level, causal factors are prioritized over phenomenological observations, and social stratification becomes the crucible of political behavior. The role of human agency generally takes a back seat: individuals, leaders and led alike, are unable to influence the course of developments, swept away as they are by the inexorable forces of history. Due to their deterministic aura, such epistemological assumptions have always been in tension with an understanding of bottom-up

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[2] Scholars from different schools have tried to retain insights from this literature while avoiding the trap of succumbing to a strict association of populism with agitation amongst farming populations. This is achieved by invoking a downgraded species of "agrarian populism" among a wider family comprising the populist genus (e.g. Canovan 1981; Mudde 2000).

social mobilization as an agentic, rational, and strategic political undertaking that exhibits a rich cultural content (Goodwin and Jasper 1999). They are also fairly at odds with strictly rational-choice models that put the focus on individual ideologico-political attitudes as represented in the arena of electoral competition.

2.2 Institutionalist Approaches

The second major family of populism theory is less macro-structural in its outlook and somewhat more appreciative of the pull of ideas at the meso and micro level. Based on theories of party system institutionalization, voter representation, cleavage formation, and issue ownership, this school of thought interprets Populism as the programmatic adumbration of a specific political ideology espoused by People's Party activists and politicians like William Jennings Bryan. According to this rationale, Bryan is considered a populist because major planks of his unconventional political platform – the lack of respect for established procedures, the support for an unorthodox monetary policy, the attacks against banking and other business interests, the intention to overhaul the structure of political representation, the obviation of moderate political conduct – would disrupt checks and balances and the rule of law, impairing the health of the American system of government by rupturing the integrity of these most basic institutions of representative democracy.

Using the original Populist experience as a model, institutionalists have inferred a set of core populist ideological dimensions by surveying the area of overlap between the programmatic manifestos of the People's Party and the preferences of its voters. We can thus distill a laundry list of populist traits (see, e.g., Shils 1956 for perhaps the earliest iteration) by which we can then decouple the concept from its historical womb, applying it deductively across time and space to examine populist ideology with respect to political leaders, parties, or even individual voters with little or no organic relation with the original Populists. The choice of traits may vary, but what remains fixed is that populism acquires meaning only when studied as a destabilizing element *vis-à-vis* a certain pillar of institutionalized government, be it a party system, the electoral process, a political regime, an economic order, or a constitutional arrangement. Since populism is a paragon of discontinuity that can only upend, disrupt, and subvert an existing status quo, institutionalist scholars frequently adopt a normative tone in their effort to raise awareness about the deleterious impact of populist agitation on the institutions of liberal democracy.

Presently, there is no general agreement within this school of thought with regards to the exact ideological precepts of populism, its necessary and sufficient dimensions, its fit with democratic norms, and its policy implications. Various elements have been suggested as capturing the "true" essence of populist ideology, ranging from a focus on economic policy (Dornbusch and Edwards 1991), to attitudes toward pluralist institutions (Müller 2016; Urbinati 2019), to the treatment of minorities (Norris and Inglehart 2019). In some cases, populism is framed as comprising an ideological package coherent enough to warrant its study as a mode of political representation or as a type of political regime (see e.g. Caramani 2017; Pappas 2019). Expanding its reach into the demand side, a subgroup specializes in constructing attitudinal indexes to test the prevalence of populist ideology within a given constituency by means of public opinion surveys (e.g. Castanho Silva et al., 2019).

Admittedly, such a wide spectrum of opinion clearly negates any sort of facile abbreviation. The numerous researchers who work within its purview have been able to offer valuable insights into an immense variety of research questions. Unfortunately, their toolset of choice is exclusively tailored to fit political manifestations of the institutionalized type, with the political party or its leader representing the preferred unit of analysis in a context where the electoral cycle monopolizes the setting of the tone for political contestation. Little if any investment is put into understanding how populist mobilization succeeds in capturing hearts and minds, how it combines political claims of a strictly materialistic nature with elements of local culture based on feelings of injustice, or how it infuses the former with a distinctly primal democratic pathos. When ordinary citizens are involved in the analysis, their views are collected as isolated data points for statistical manipulation while their grievances remain demobilized by default. It is only when hierarchical organizations and ballot boxes enter the picture that institutionalists begin to take stock of the populist phenomenon. Inevitably, our scope is limited to populism's institutional outcomes, diverting analysis away from the study of intermediary mechanisms of populist agitation such as strategic intent, the negotiation of social grievances, processes of identity formation, and the role of culture and emotions.

2.3 Discursive appreciations

As with the second, the third and final major perspective – favored mostly by political scientists and theorists – reiterates that capital-P Populism was just one case within a much larger set of small-p populisms. Important as it was for giving the group a

name, American Populism was not the earliest populist movement, nor was Bryan the first populist to ever win the spotlight, so we cannot therefore limit the concept to the People's Party's members and voters. The focus, however, is not on macro-structural shifts, nor on a purported set of ideological features of Populism and their implications for the institutional framework. It is rather the discursive form that becomes the defining criterion of populist mobilization (Laclau 2005; Panizza 2005). This approach prioritizes the mediating role of language, framing, and narrative, in the process of social construction, while emphasizing the importance of the culturally-bound political vocabulary that populists utilize in their effort to induce mobilization.

In terms of research methods, proponents of this view analyze textual products to decide if a political actor has, out of the myriad ways available to politicize social grievances, opted to construct reality as a dualistic struggle between "the people" – the in-group of choice – and those "elites" who distort the system to advance their narrow interests. The actor who systematically resorts to populist discourse can then be labelled a populist, since the conjuring of this specific socio-political imaginary becomes central for purposes of political mobilization. Hence, it was neither the official endorsement of the People's Party nor his policy proposal that made Bryan a populist, but his decision to base his political project on constructing a catch-all identity of a "people" unjustly stripped of their sovereignty through the deliberate perversion of the system by a self-serving elite of the Eastern Seabord. Whether he was "truly" a populist or whether he invested in this binary social construction for strategic purposes is an interesting question but at the same time a moot one for purposes of analytical classification.[3]

This latter point opens up the group to the criticism that behind their nominally discursive and cultural appreciation of the populist phenomenon lies an overly behavioral approach where form is accentuated to the point of discounting valuable observations about populism's organizational, institutional, and ideological implications. Most scholars of the discursive school would respond by at least partly accepting this as a feature rather than a handicap. Deference to the principle of popular sovereignty is acknowledged as the touchstone for the "people's" moral advantage over unscrupulous "elites." But this rudimentary *forma mentis* is not consistent with what many institutionalists see as the marking of a formal political ideology or an otherwise coherent programmatic agenda. The sociopolitical output of populist mobilization is open-

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[3] Taking the argument a step further, an important subgroup within this camp casts discourse as operating more widely than mere rhetoric, adding elements of style (e.g., gestures, attire, mannerisms, etc.) as important markers of populism (Knight 1998; Moffitt 2016) and thus introducing cultural elements into the analysis.

ended; it refuses to adhere to strict policy norms or to produce patterned outcomes as with an ideologically conscious program of action. Therefore, the continuities that other schools of thought indicate with regards to party organization, institutional breakdown, and so on, are circumstantial artifacts that cannot be allowed definitional status.

To study populism is then to abstract a specific discursive behavior – an antiestablishment discourse in the name of the "people" – and to employ it deductively in search of populist instances around the world, including phenomena that predate the rise of the Farmers' Alliances in the American context. The flexibility of the populist discursive trope, which, importantly, manifests in grades rather than in an on-off form, allows political and cultural agents (parties, leaders, movements, the media, artists, etc.) to use it in collecting disparate grievances under a single tent. Hence, in disagreement with the historicist or structuralist approach, no specific class or other sociological entity can be prioritized as the main locus of populist mobilization.

3. The regional divide among institutionalists: Europeanists vs Latin Americanists

Classifications rely on perspective. Bryan's yardstick surely fails to account for every single division produced by the different research agendas out there. [4] A regionally conscious glance at the literature of the last couple of decades reveals a further cleavage within the institutionalist camp that merits *ad hoc* treatment. The cleavage is between scholars of Latin American politics who study populism as a radical left-wing phenomenon in presidential party systems, and their European peers who evaluate it as an instance of radical right-wing politics in multiparty parliamentary democracies.

First, there is the troubling issue of the unit of analysis. When the word "populism" is uttered in a Latin American context it is hard to avoid conjuring up the image of a flamboyant President (predominantly male), colorful sash hanging from his right shoulder, waving triumphantly to a sea of raving crowds from the balcony of his presidential

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[4] Notably, many important contributions seem to straddle the divides or to mix-and-match elements taken from all three camps, as presented here. For instance, Mudde's (2004) influential classification of populism under the genus of "thin-centered ideology," an idea first suggested by Margaret Canovan (2002), belongs ostensibly to the second camp. However, since no clear ideological or programmatic dimensions are actually suggested, and since a "people versus elites" tension over popular sovereignty is posited as constitutive of populism, Mudde's (2004; 2007) work occupies a spot within the grey zone between the institutional and the discursive. Similarly, Hawkins (2010) adopts a nominally discursive take on populism, but his work is mostly geared towards the analysis of institutional outcomes.

palace. Populism is regarded as a one-man show. The emphasis on the executive is of such paramount importance that it fosters a slew of near-onomatopoetic varieties of the phenomenon: Peronismo, Varguismo, Gaitanismo, Kirchnerismo, Fujimorismo, Chavismo, and so on.

What holds this corpus together is an appreciation of populist mobilization as a strictly top-down phenomenon that inhibits the development of institutionalized party bureaucracies. The spellbinding protagonist bypasses mediating institutions to appeal directly to unorganized, atomized constituencies (de la Torre and Arnson 2013), operating as a master manipulator of diffuse resentment who takes advantage of the electoral process to pursue a personalistic agenda that erodes the proper function of political representation. This perspective colors the Latin American breed of populism with an aura of a "this is not how politics should be done" quality. "Under populism," Kurt Weyland (2001, 13) states in a widely-cited paper, "the ruler is an individual, that is, a personalistic leader" and "the connection between leader and followers is based mostly on direct, quasi-personal contact, not on organizational intermediation." Striking a similar note, Levitsky and Loxton (2013, 110) argue that populists are outsiders who "mobilize mass support via anti-establishment appeals" by means of a "personalistic linkage to voters, circumventing parties and other forms of institutional mediation." The Weberian notion of charismatic – as opposed to rational-legal – authority undergirds the theorization of this linkage: populists, Conniff (2012, 7) declares axiomatically, are "leaders who had charismatic relationships with mass followings and who won elections regularly." An unmediated, emotional, psychological, quasi-mystical relationship between leader and led is generally regarded as the common core of all populist episodes in Latin American history.

This rationale inevitably renders populist politics incompatible with the representation of societal interests through established institutional structures, a function traditionally assigned to political parties: "By contrast to the strong organization provided by an institutionalized party and the stable connections established by patron-client ties," Weyland (2001, 13) says, "the relationship between populist leaders and their mass constituency is uninstitutionalized and fluid." Here lies the analytical cleavage with Europeanists on whose ears this type of statement rings strange, given that they tend to focus *specifically* on the political party as their unit of analysis. Furthermore, the stipulated need for strong and unmediated leadership, "charismatic" or not, seems

at odds with the concrete reality of European populist affairs (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2014; Pappas 2016a).[5]

The conceptual divergence becomes starker when the clause of "broad mass support" of an electoral nature is taken seriously enough to become "the *ultima ratio* of [Latin American] populism" (Weyland 2001, 12). Steep levels of electoral backing for the populist agent are not a given in Europe, where the average populist party seldom manages to enlist popular majorities. Passing the five percent mark in national polls usually spells "breakthrough" for a European populist party, allowing practitioners to incorporate the newcomer into their datasets (e.g. Mudde 2007).[6] So, on the one hand we have images of populist presidents in Latin America who are swept to power on the backs of popular majorities, and on the other, we have experts spending their whole careers laboring over populist parties with meager political influence over European society.

How can we explain the thorough lack of rapport between the two regions? Perhaps cultural or historical factors play their role, but the more obvious culprit is a basic difference in the system of government. In countries with presidential systems, executive power naturally ends up in the hands of a single person. Political parties still matter at the congressional level, but in the eyes of the public, electoral campaigns are fought between presidential contestants. Analysts accustomed to such a setting are understandably prone to associate populism with individual politicians rather than their parties. To take the United States as a clear example, several presidents or presidential candidates have been designated as populists (e.g., Donald Trump, Ronald Reagan, Pat Buchanan, George McGovern, George Wallace, Theodore Roosevelt, Andrew Jackson, and Thomas Jefferson), and scholars have even claimed that the whole character of American politics is fundamentally populist (Hofstadter 1955). However, rarely does anyone go on to brand the Republican or the Democratic Party as such. The two political organizations are conceived as durable institutional and ideological substrates upon which a politician may potentially (and temporarily) erect a populist superstructure, yet

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[5] The usual populist suspects in the very heart of Europe – e.g. the Front National in France, the SVP in Switzerland, the Vlaams Belang in Belgium, the Lega in Italy, or the FPÖ in Austria – have been contesting elections uninterruptedly for the last thirty to forty years, under different leaders. We can hardly refuse to designate these parties as populist merely because they may lack leaders falling within the "great leader" trope. At best, the argument over whether populism requires personalistic leadership is trivial, boiling down to the truism that a party with a popular leader at the helm enjoys better electoral prospects. At worst, the argument is spurious, since no control group is ever employed to test it: personalistic leadership may plausibly benefit all sorts of political campaigning, not just the populist type.

[6] According to my calculations, the average electoral strength of populist right-wing parties in Mudde (2007) is 12.9%. In an updated version of his dataset, the average drops further to 9.6% (Mudde 2013).

the populist element never seems to become entrenched enough to justify calling the entire party "populist." European critics therefore charge that the study of populism in the Americas has been forced to fit the institutional structure of the region, thereby distorting the phenomenon's true proportions. The assertion that populism is "a question of who gains public office and how they govern" (Conniff 2012, 2) hinders comparison with democracies of the parliamentary type where the political party is used as the main unit of analysis.[7]

The conceptual disjunction between Americanists and Europeanists comes starkly to the fore in a recent chapter for *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, where Weyland (2017, 62) stands his analytical ground, and in defiance to the rest of the volume's authors goes on to claim that "much of Europe's right-wing radicalism may be a different 'political animal' and not fall under populism." According to this most influential scholar of Latin American populism, archetypal cases in the European literature like the Front National or the Vlaams Belang are too institutionalized and too unsuccessful to pass the bar. Genuine populists are non-ideological actors, notorious for their opportunism, whereas the leaders of European right-wing radicalism, on the contrary, are inflexible and dogmatic, and their personalism is "ideocratic."

Weyland's argument rests on criteria I have strongly protested in the previous paragraphs, but this does not mean his final assessment is necessarily incorrect. The knee-jerk identification of every European right-wing radical or extremist as a "populist" is of late receiving justified criticism for indiscriminately lumping together phenomena of a different substance and caliber that should remain analytically separated (e.g., De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; Pappas 2016b; Stavrakakis et al. 2017). At the same time, it suggests another dimension of the gulf between European and Latin American scholarship, this time pertaining to populism's ideological valence. Latin America, the "hotbed" of radical left-wing populism (Castaneda 2006), stands at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum from Europe, the den of radical right-wing populists (Caiani and Císař 2019; Heinisch et al. 2017; Mudde 2007). The reasons here are mostly socio-

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[7] For a thorough analysis of this Americanist "bias", see Aslanidis (2017). The reluctance to apply the Latin American theoretical paradigm in Europe was revealed during the 2017 French presidential election. Emmanuel Macron donned an outsider persona and mobilized a vehement anti-establishment discourse, winning the Presidency on the basis of a purely uninstitutionalized linkage with voters, since his personalistic electoral vehicle – the *En Marche* party – was still in the cards. During the campaign Macron even acquiesced to being qualified as a populist if that meant "talking to the people in a comprehensible manner without the intermediation of mechanisms," a behavior he contrasted to that of the demagogue who merely "flatters the people" (Macron 2017). Even though Macron was the one who ticked many of the boxes, it was his far less popular or charismatic foe, Marine Le Pen, that won exclusive coverage as the populist candidate.

historical and ideological. Long-standing socioeconomic inequalities in South American societies have traditionally led to anti-establishment appeals primarily emerging from the left side of the political spectrum. After a brief but important interlude in the early 1990s when "neo-populists" with pro-free-market agendas won power in Argentina, Peru, and Brazil (Roberts 1995; Weyland 1996), the association between populism and left-wing politics re-emerged at the turn of the century, with left-wing populist leaders such as Chavez in Venezuela, Morales in Bolivia, and Correa in Ecuador breathing new life into the Latin American populist literature.

In Western European circles, the absence of a patterned sequence of anti-establishment challenges to the dominance of Christian-Democratic and Social-Democratic parties in the post-war setting had rendered the concept of populism irrelevant in public and academic discourse, despite the existence of a far right undercurrent in many nations.[8] When, for instance, Enoch Powell shocked Britain with his "Rivers of Blood" speech in April 1968, no one thought of denouncing him as "a populist". The terms "racist," "demagogue," or "nationalist" captured the substance of his political message well enough at the time. European scholars only began to employ the term reluctantly in the mid-1980s and more fervently after the mid-1990s when burgeoning far right parties such as the *Front National*, the *Republikaner*, and the *FPÖ* received treatment as manifestations of *national-populisme* in France (Taguieff 1984) and *Rechtspopulismus* in Germanic-speaking countries, wedding populism firmly with extremism on the right, thereby sparking a long trail of influential scholarship as such parties began to multiply across the continent (e.g. Betz 1994). The association – undoubtedly influenced by the European trauma of fascism – has since remained a fixture of almost every political formation to the right of mainstream conservatives in European party systems. Thus, when Latin Americanists speak of (left-wing) populism, they invoke a traditionally socioeconomic understanding of left versus right. In the European context, the debate around (right-wing) populism reflects socio-cultural attitudes where xenophobia and nativism overshadow questions on the role of the state in the national economy.

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[8] Greece was an important exception; see the early work by Mouzelis (1978). Green parties challenged the establishment in several Western European countries during the 1970s and early 1980s, but political analysts seldom saw value in emphasizing their populist characteristics, perhaps due to the lack of a proper theoretical framework in Europe at the time.

4. Making room for culture

Having laid out a conceptual grid to describe the main tensions in the literature of populism we can now proceed to contribute to the main topic of this special issue: the field's disappointing attention to cultural aspects of populist mobilization (Caiani and Padoan, this issue). By design, institutionalist and structuralist approaches are rather unconcerned with cultural explorations of political contention. The sole direction offered on that end is through an identification of "right-wing populism" with ultra-nationalist or nativist sentiment that is to be subsequently analyzed through the lens of culture. However, this interpretation frequently misreads the populist call for the restitution of *popular* sovereignty by equating it with a call for *national* sovereignty that may follow an aggressively and primordially cultural – nativist, ethnic, or even racist – logic, thus overlooking the democratic and egalitarian core of the populist plea and its crucial anti-elitist component, and thereby missing the opportunity to study how cultural themes inform it.[9]

Moreover, as I argued earlier, institutionalists on both sides of the Atlantic leave no space for populism as a grassroots phenomenon, a striking omission given that Populism emerged historically as a popular movement to only become institutionalized in the People's Party at a later stage. Social grievances, ideologies, values, cultural norms, and other elements with a potential for politicization, can equally find expression within and without an electoral vehicle, and it is most frequently in the non-institutional domain that culture reverberates the strongest. It is not only culturally rich social movements that are left out when populism becomes anchored to a dominant leader or a political party but also journalism and forms of politically-conscious art. The interesting debates on "media populism" (Mazzoleni 2008), or on the populist literature of Hamlin Garland (Brown 1994), L. Frank Baum (Littlefield 1964), and John Steinbeck (Simkins 2006), or on the populist cinematography of Frank Capra (Phelps 1979), and the influence of Populist poetry on American folk music (Eyerman and Jamison 1998) would be rendered non-sensical in the very fields where we expect culture to play a particularly crucial role.

The discursive school offers a more hospitable venue for introducing culture into the study of populism. Elements of local and national culture pop up regularly in analyses of populist discourse, from the way elites are criticized and often ridiculed as culturally

[9] Populism and nationalism may at times overlap but that should not allow a haphazard blurring of the lines between them. On the need to retain a distinction between nationalism and populism see De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017) as well as Brubaker's (2019) rebuke. Gamper Sachse (2018) analyzes empirically how the two forms of identity construction interact in the case of Catalonian independence.

distant from "ordinary people" for the way they talk, their attire, their stylized table manners, their lavish lifestyles, their culinary tastes, their preference for the "high" arts and so on, to the populist veneration of the folksy ways of the "common man" that symbolize the authenticity and egalitarian ethos of the underdog. While these discursive features are on occasion pertinent for top-down populist projects (see e.g. Moffitt 2016; Ostiguy 2017), it is still the organizational, structural, electoral, and attitudinal dimensions that scholars of party-system populism predominantly seek to dissect in their work, with culture acting as the occasional mediator.

On the contrary, episodes of grassroots populist mobilization, where populism comes in the form of a social movement rather than a hierarchical, electorally-conscious organization, offer us a unique opportunity to study the interaction with cultural social products, given that social movements are pregnant with symbolic meaning as their activists consciously or unconsciously draw from the rich pool of cultural norms and symbolisms in order to mobilize citizens for their causes (Aslanidis 2016a, 2018; Caiani and Císař 2019). The populist movements of the Great Recession in Iceland, Spain, Greece, Israel, and the United States, the Gezi Park protests in Turkey, the Hong Kong Umbrella Revolution, the Yellow Vest movement in France, the Sudanese Revolution, and the recent movements in Lebanon and Iraq, all contain heaps of evidence pointing to the dominant role of culture in the construction of populist identity. Populist culture has been repeatedly forged and enacted in streets and squares by unnamed activists to then remain in abeyance for future generations of grassroots populists once the current agitation subsides. From the messages written on banners and placards, to the chants they compose, the slogans they shout, their flags and even the name they choose for their causes, populist movement entrepreneurs are conscious that the quality of cultural capital invested in their struggle matters greatly in the successful construction of a catch-all narrative to unite "the people" above partisan, ethnic, religious, class, and other divides.

In this sense, scholars interested in culture and populism have much to learn from the vast literature that social movement experts have produced over the past decades. A most promising avenue, commensurate with a discursive take on populism, is the literature on collective action framing, introduced by sociologist David Snow and his associates in the late-1980s. To put this literature to work in the service of populism studies, we must switch to a social movement perspective and define populism as a type of collective action frame, that is, *an action-oriented interpretation of reality that frames popular grievances as the outcome of an unjust erosion of popular sovereignty perpetrated by manipulating elites* (Aslanidis 2016a, 2016b, 2018). Thus, we will be able to assess the significance of culture as a contributing factor in a process of meaning-

making termed "frame alignment" (Snow et al. 1986; Zuo and Benford 1995). Move-ment activists employ this process to compile building blocks of symbolic matter that allow them to adjust the populist frame of the movement – the *people versus elites* trope – to popular aspirations. How this works is briefly explained in the paragraphs below.

Theories of collective action usually begin with dispelling the misconception that "objective" societal grievances automatically yield a specific political reaction on the part of those affected as macro-structural or overly economistic views would hold. Agency, through skill, creativity, and strategy, intervenes to inspire action by construct-ing and broadcasting a resonant frame that "explains" what is going on out there as the product of specific human forces. Before citizens can be mobilized, grievances need to be emphasized and amplified, their emotive potential leveraged to work alongside cognitive evaluations. To do that, a collective action frame must align its interpretation of the situation with individual orientations, so that "some set of individual interests, values and beliefs and [social movement] activities, goals, and ideology are congruent and complementary" (Snow et al. 1986, 464). The goal of *narrative fidelity* becomes a crucial component: successful framing efforts "resonate with cultural narrations, that is, with the stories, myths, and folk tales that are part and parcel of one's cultural her-itage and that thus function to inform events and experiences in the immediate pre-sent" (Snow and Benford 1988, 210).

In the case of populist mobilization, the articulation of blame needs to be sharpened toward a single point of failure in the system at the highest possible level, contributing to a narrative that recognizes "elites" as culprits and "the people" as victims, chiseling away competing causal interpretations based on traditional sociopolitical cleavages of a sectarian nature. At the same time, populists cannot rely exclusively on a dry, juridi-cal invocation of a vigilant people-as-sovereign to instigate a political insurgency. "The people" cannot simply come together in union at a skin-deep, procedural level. The otherwise latent belief in the value of popular sovereignty provides a useful substrate for collective action, but activists still need resonant symbolic markers and cultural mo-tifs to crystallize the notion of "a people" acting in concert against injustice.

Culture enters the picture as an instrument of frame alignment by providing symbol-ic and emotive tissue to help glue together the otherwise disparate political worldviews that temporarily coalesce within a populist movement. When one wishes to establish unyielding popular unity against a common elite enemy, knocking down the disruptive salience of class identity, ideological beliefs, material interests, gender, or even religious sentiment and ethnic make-up, culture can work as the linchpin to align and set in motion an audience of colorful ideological and social make-up. Citizens

are deeply imbedded in a system of cultural codes that can be mobilized to substantiate a distance from usurping elites; and since movements are both "consumers of existing cultural meanings and producers of new meanings" (Tarrow 1992, 189), "the people" will witness and contribute to cultural breakthroughs of a recalcitrant, anti-establishment nature right there on the spot where populist collective identity is constructed anew, thus galvanizing a feeling of camaraderie, establishing trust, and strengthening the resolve to stand together until the movement fulfills its redemptive mission.

Methodologically, frame analysis is helpfully in tune with studies of populist discourse in that it also relies on analyzing textual data – in a broad sense – to understand framing processes (Johnston 2005; Vicari 2010). This is done primarily by recourse to qualitative assessments, while also allowing quantitative explorations. Due to its infrequency and its usually short duration, grassroots mobilization is logistically cumbersome to analyze as compared to the study of party system politics. However, relying on the tried-and-tested literature on frame theory and the process of frame alignment as a theoretical framework, a research agenda that engages with the cultural aspect of populist mobilization has at its disposal a range of reliable research practices. Participant observation, interview data, the analysis of movement manifestos, assembly minutes, pamphlets, mottos, banners, and chants, all help to uncover how culture serves as a contributing factor in constructing and buttressing an emergent populist identity.

The spotty nature of social mobilization is no excuse for ignoring the numerous episodes of grassroots populism in favor of the electoral manifestations of the phenomenon. Perhaps the greatest hurdle moving forward is the mutual reluctance between political scientists and sociologists to delve into each other's literature to borrow and build upon existing concepts and methods. The publication of this special issue is an encouraging signal that such a cooperation is not only feasible but also advantageous to both camps.

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