

Populism in the Civil Sphere

EDITED BY JEFFREY C. ALEXANDER,
PETER KIVISTO AND GIUSEPPE SCIORTINO



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Jeffrey C. Alexander, Peter Kivisto,
and Giuseppe Sciortino

polity

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Contents

<i>Notes on the Contributors</i>	vii
<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	xi
Introduction: The Populist Continuum from Within the Civil Sphere to Outside It <i>Jeffrey C. Alexander</i>	1
1 Populism's Cultural and Civil Dynamics <i>Marcus Morgan</i>	17
2 #Disente and Duterte: The Cultural Bases of Antipopulism in the Philippines, 2001–2019 <i>Celso M. Villegas</i>	44
3 Uncivil Populism in Power: The Case of Erdoğanism <i>Ateş Altınordu</i>	74
4 The Populist Transition and the Civil Sphere in Mexico <i>Nelson Arteaga Botello</i>	96
5 Far-Right Populism in Poland and the Construction of a Pseudocivil Sphere <i>Maria Luengo and Małgorzata Kolankowska</i>	125
6 The “Thirteenth Immigrant”? Migration and Populism in the 2018 Czech Presidential Election <i>Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky</i>	152
7 Memory Culture, the Civil Sphere, and Right-Wing Populism in Germany: The Resistible Rise of the <i>Alternative für Deutschland</i> (AfD) <i>Werner Binder</i>	178

CONTENTS

8	Populism and the Particularization of Solidarity: On the Sweden Democrats <i>Henrik Enroth</i>	205
9	Left Populism in a Communist Civil Sphere: The Lesson of Bo Xilai <i>Andrew Junker</i>	232
10	A Civil Sphere Theory of Populism: American Forms and Templates, from the Red Scare to Donald Trump <i>Jason L. Mast</i>	251
	Commentary: Demarcating Constructive from Destructive Populisms: Civil Translation vs. Civil Mimicry <i>Carlo Tognato</i>	278
	Conclusion: Is Populism the Shadow of the Civil? <i>Peter Kivisto and Giuseppe Sciortino</i>	287
	<i>Index</i>	304

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NOTES ON THE CONTRIBUTORS

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NOTES ON THE CONTRIBUTORS

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This volume is the fifth in an ongoing series of works whose aim is to elaborate, revise, and globalize civil sphere theory (CST), a sociological perspective on solidarity and democracy developed by Alexander, his collaborators, and students over the last three decades. Prior volumes have examined Latin America, East Asia, and the Nordic nations. There are volumes in preparation devoted to India and Canada. A parallel line of development is thematic: beside populism, another volume has explored the implications of CST for the analysis of radical action; another will soon deal with the connection between CST and the notion of cultural trauma.

The contributors to this project convened for two days of intensive conversation in New Haven in June 2019. The gathering was sponsored by the Edward J. and Dorothy Clarke Kempf Memorial Fund established by Yale University's Macmillan Center for International and Area Studies, as well as by the International Migration Laboratory of the University of Trento.

Alexander and Sciortino have collaborated on matters of theory, culture, and politics since the mid-1980s; two decades later, Kivisto joined with them to work on theorizing the civil sphere. As a Yale doctoral student, Anne Marie Champagne has played a pivotal role in organizing these civil sphere projects, and her role in the present collaboration has been indispensable. Nadine Amalfi, Program Coordinator for Yale's Center for Cultural Sociology, admirably administered and organized the June 2019 New Haven conference. Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky, a contributor to this volume, also served, and not for the first time, as a highly professional editor.

We wish to record our gratitude to the contributors to this volume, whose perseverance, political engagement, and theoretical curiosity have

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Introduction

The Populist Continuum from Within the Civil Sphere to Outside It

Jeffrey C. Alexander

A specter is haunting our contemporary societies. Its name is “populism,” in quotation marks, because scholars can’t agree about what it is. Except for one thing: populism is a deviation from democracy, the source of the precarious position so many Western and Eastern, Northern and Southern societies find themselves in today. This volume aims to break the Gordian knot of “populism” by bringing to bear a new social theory, and, in doing so, suggest that the normative judgment about this misunderstood social and political tendency needs reconsidering as well. Populism is not a democratic deviation, but a naturally occurring dimension of everyday democracy. In moral terms, it can be good *or* bad, a force for democratic civil repair *or* a force that undermines its very possibility. As the contributions to this volume demonstrate, populism is a continuum stretching from the political left to the right, fatal to democracy only on the extremes.

The effort to properly understand populism depends on better comprehending contemporary democratic societies and their discontents. Sociologists have rarely been interested in theorizing democracy, and when they have done so, they have had great difficulty (e.g., Bourdieu 1996) understanding the cultural-cum-institutional complexities that can sustain and destroy it. Like the extremist populists who are the civil sphere’s enemies, sociologists have reduced democracy to material interest (Lipset 1981 [1960]); to the masses against the elites (Schumpeter 1942; Mills 1956; Michels 1962 [1911]); to the battle of less privileged over more privileged classes (Moore 1966; Wright 2015); to the flourishing of grassroots associations against institutions and states (Putnam 1996; Skocpol 2003); to the triumph of public altruism over private greed (Habermas 1989 [1963]).

This volume offers an alternative. Civil sphere theory (CST) is a

sociological model of democracy that incorporates the cultural turn that began transforming the social sciences four decades ago (Alexander 2006). Contributors to *Populism in the Civil Sphere* bring this new theoretical light to bear on the dark political and cultural forces that menace democracies around the world today.

Since democratic political theory first emerged 2,500 years ago, it has rested upon the Socratic notion that virtues like rationality, honesty, altruism, cooperation, autonomy, and liberty are the fundamentals of democratic life (Skinner 1978). CST sees such qualities, by contrast, not as existential virtues upon which democratic governments can be built, but as cultural structures central to democratic discourse. Powerful signifying references, they have to be instantiated in social life via symbolic performances and communicative and regulative institutions. CST does not conceptualize democracy only as governmental structure, but rather, in Dewey's (1966 [1916]) words, as a way of life. Democratic life depends less on voting procedures and legal rights – in and of themselves – than on the social existence of a performatively compelling, emotionally vital, and morally universalizing sphere of solidarity, one in which feelings for others whom one will never meet fuels moral recognition and emotional compassion. It is only upon the base of such a moral-cum-emotional form of civil community that the all-important communicative and regulative institutions of democracy can be sustained.

Political democracy depends on feelings of mutual regard, on experiencing a shared solidarity despite deep antipathies of interest and ideology. There must be some historically specific vision of a shared universalism that transcends the particularisms of class, race, gender, sex, region, and nationality. Because populism is highly polarizing, it has the phenomenological effect of stoking anxiety that civil solidarity is breaking apart. Left populists often feel as if civil solidarity is an illusion, that democratic discourse is a fig leaf for private interests, and that the social and cultural differentiation that vouchsafes the independence of the civil sphere merely reflects the hegemony of narrow professional interests or those of a ruling class. Right populists often share the same distrust of, even repulsion for, the civil sphere. What seems civil to the center and left, like affirmative action or open immigration, they call out as particularistic; honored civil icons, such as Holocaust memorials, they trash. Can the sense of a vital civil center survive such criticism and censure from populism on the left and on the right (Schlesinger 1949; Alexander 2016b; Kivisto 2019; Luengo and Ihlebæk 2020)? Only if civil solidarity can regulate ideal and material conflict in such a manner that enemies become frenemies, that sharp antagonism is moderated such that agonism thrives (Mouffe 2000).

INTRODUCTION

Populist rhetoric on both the left and the right is inflammatory in tone and demagogic in style, but is it actually antidemocratic, as social scientific students of populism so often have claimed (Arditi 2005; Moffitt 2016; Müller 2016)? Populists rail against fake news and vested interests that hide the truth, describing only their own side as rational, independent, and honest. Populists call opponents enemies and liars. They attack their opponents as selfish, and brag relentlessly about their own generosity. Populists claim to expose secret conspiracies against “the people,” portraying themselves, their parties, and their governments as transparent and responsive, as open for all to see. Populists attack elites and privilege, dividing society into us and them; aligning themselves with the people, they vow to drastically change what they see as the biased and polarizing rules of the social and political game.

While these snapshots of democratic drama can be decidedly alarming normatively, empirically they are part and parcel of every civil sphere. What we see and hear is the binary discourse that has, from the beginning, dynamized and polarized, enabled and constrained, actually existing civil spheres (Alexander 2010; Alexander and Jaworsky 2014; Kivisto 2017; Morgan this volume, Chapter 1). Throughout the history of modern democracies, and ancient ones as well, populist leaders, on both right and left, have “worked the binaries” to suggest that their opponents are civilly incapable, that only they themselves are willing and able to act on behalf of the people’s side, to be rational, autonomous, open, cooperative, and altruistic, thus allowing solidarity and liberty to be maintained or restored (Kazin 2006; Judis 2016).

The clear and present danger that extreme, radically populist movements pose to contemporary democracies does not emerge from rhetoric that pits the putatively civil against the uncivil. It comes, rather, when such simplistic yet inveterate binarism is employed to constrain the autonomy of the civil sphere institutions that sustain democratic life. The making and unmaking of civil solidarity, its upgrading and downgrading, depends on connecting the sacred-democratic and profane-authoritarian sides of democratic discourse to ongoing events and struggles in particular times and places. This is the work of civil institutions. The binary discourse of the civil sphere makes democracy broadly meaningful; what communicative and regulative institutions do is to articulate this abstract language in the here and now. Public opinion polls, associations, and journalism (Alexander 2016a) are media of civil communication. They specify democratic values and discourses on behalf of civil solidarity, issuing highly public judgments about the civil and uncivil character of interests, groups, movements, and events, judgments that are, in principle, independent of popular leaders and parties who claim to speak

for the people directly. The other filtering mechanisms of civil spheres are regulative, the institutions of voting and electoral competition, the impersonal structures of office, and the precedent-bound and rights-based matrices of law.

The elites who organize and represent these communicative and regulative institutions are civil sphere agents. In principle, their ideal and material interests coincide with the defense of the civil sphere's autonomy. Civil sphere agents (Alexander 2018) mediate the charismatic claims of populist leaders and movements, intertwining interpretation and coercion, producing universalizing, quasi-factual evidence that can symbolically pollute, arrest, and sometimes even incarcerate those who are deemed the civil sphere's antidemocratic enemies. Investigative journalists and crusading attorneys are ambitious for glory, but of a democratic kind. Their hopes to become civil heroes can be stymied by populist demagogues, whether of the right or left, who believe that only they themselves can speak for the people – in immediate rather than mediate ways, as vessels rather than instruments of civil power, as the only true representative of the general will. When the representational process at the heart of modern struggles for power comes to be centered in a single man or woman rather than in relatively independent communicative institutions, you have Caesarism (Weber 1978). When symbolic power is less civil than plebiscitarian, it becomes a modern Prince (Gramsci 1959), a vanguard political party that crystallizes the voice of the people via *their* media, *their* associations, *their* constructions of polls, *their* judges and courts. Buoyed by their presumption to speak for the people, radically populist demagogues seek not only to monopolize the communicative power of symbolic representation, but also to destroy the organizational autonomy of regulative institutions. Radical populists cannot tolerate independent courts interpreting and applying civil discourse. They cannot allow independent media elites to decide who and what is more rational, more honest, and more true, on the one hand, and more secretive, more hidden, and more threatening on the other. The ethical, universalizing regulation of office is deeply compromised, power becomes personal and familial, and corruption becomes quotidian, not deviance but everyday life. Patrimonial domination (Arteaga Botello and Arzuaga Magnoni 2018; Tognato 2018), the culture of deference (Choi 2019), and the fusion of the leader's mystical and earthly bodies (Reed 2020) are alternatives to civil power, to constitutionally regulated office, and the kind of critical, independent communicative and regulative mediation that underpins an ethic of responsibility (Weber 1946 [1922]). Elections become more like spectacles than moral performances, empty showcases for staging dramaturgic

INTRODUCTION

authority instead of occasions for agonistic displays of binding democratic discourse.

Under such conditions of discursive constriction and institutional fusion, the presuppositions of a universalizing solidarity become severely constrained. Civil spheres shrink, reflecting the primordial qualities of the leader and party who have grabbed representational power. The civil sphere loses its dialectical dynamism. Rather than moving back and forth across the ideological continuum, populism stops at the far-left or the far-right side. Instead of continuously shifting moments in the pendulum swing of social and cultural history, populism becomes a punctum (Barthes 1981), a point that halts the movement and threatens to break the marvelously subtle, powerful but flexible, finely tuned but always precarious democratic machine.

The centrality of affectual and moral solidarity to CST can give the misleading impression that the theory is idealistic in the empirical sense of “what is,” not only in the normative sense of “what should be.” This is not the case. Civil solidarity is established in real time and place, in a territory from which others are excluded and by founders and successors who view their own primordial qualities as essential to the demonstration of civil capacity. The sacred “discourse of liberty” that defines democratic motives, relations, and institutions is binary. Its values are relational, contrasted to and intertwined with a “discourse of repression” that lays out the anticivil profane. The individuals, groups, and institutions associated with such polluting qualities must be excluded if civil societies are to survive. Tension between the sacred light that inspires liberty and the polluted darkness that triggers repression lies at the very heart of the civil sphere, which means real existing civil spheres are far from realizing the civil-democratic ideal of normative theory. Amidst the anticivil fragmentations and complexities of modern times, the independent power of civil spheres is always contested and compromised. In political theory, the antidemocratic tradition is portrayed as the antirepublican backlash initiated by such thinkers as Hobbes (Skinner 2018), leavened with counter-Enlightenment thought (Berlin 1979; Alexander 2019a), giving birth to the war against liberty celebrated by Carl Schmitt (1996 [1932]), which continues to animate modern life today. CST projects the same historical struggle, but conceptualizes liberty and repression as the linked binaries of a single discourse, one that continuously forms the backdrop of struggles for democracy and against it.

The paradox that animates CST is that universalizing solidarity and the civil power drawn from it are always and everywhere compromised by modern society’s centrifugal parts. The civil sphere promises and helps produce solidarity and democratic integration, yet the noncivil institutions

surrounding it, and the internal strains generated by the contradictions of space, time, and function, make the expansion of civil solidarity equivocal and the achievement of civil power precarious. Inclusionary, civil solidarity moves on tracks that cross those along which more exclusionary and primordial solidarities run. The expansion of democratic justice invariably also intertwines with restrictions produced by classes, regions, religions, ethnicities, genders, sexualities, and races. As a normative ideal, the civil sphere is peaceful; as a sociological phenomenon, the civil sphere is contradictory, tense, tumultuous, and contentious. It is still possible, nonetheless, to sustain the reality of a vital center. The more democratic the society, the more heightened and passionate the arguments over who is civil and who is not, who is deserving of incorporation and who isn't. The empirical operation of actually existing civil spheres is never at one with the normative code of democratic solidarity, yet it can still strongly reinforce it.

Populism is triggered by contradictions at the heart of actually existing civil spheres. The historical founders of democratic regimes form elite status groups that seek to restrict civil qualities to certain kinds (their own) of ethnicity, race, religion, gender, sexuality, and class (Alexander 2006: Chapter 8). The institutions and values that abut civil spheres, controlled by elites whose ideal and material interests are noncivil, often intrude into civil spheres, reconstructing the binary codes so they align with their own (Alexander 2018). These structures of civil exclusion and anticivil domination are continuously challenged by populist movements seeking to enlarge incorporation and strengthen civil power (Laclau 2005). Left populist movements call out elites; demand more civil and democratic distributions of economic wealth; and attack racial, religious, ethnic, and regional barriers. They work to purify the compromised civil sphere, to overcome fragmentation and polarization in the name of a more civil cohesion and a more virtuous people. Rather than being dangerous to democracy, such left populist movements reflect nothing more, and nothing less, than the everyday processes of actually existing civil spheres. Dividing the virtuous people from corrupt elites can be a powerfully restorative discourse, despite the often-overweening simplifications and sanctimonious rhetoric of some progressive groups.

As Marcus Morgan and Celso Villegas suggest (Chapters 1 and 2), left populist movements have been at the heart of social liberalism and social democracy (Marshall 1965), making liberal government into a more democratic way of life. The dangers associated with left populism – which have so often allowed it to be conflated with populism on the radical right – have to do with how fast and how far it goes. Demands for repairs in the name of the people – what Swedish social democ-

INTRODUCTION

racy calls “the people’s home” (Engelstad and Larsen 2019; Enroth and Henriksson 2019; Enroth this volume, Chapter 8) – can become dangerously impatient, increasingly intolerant of those who defend the material and ideal interests of groups ensconced in the status quo. Progressive populist leaders can become hungry not only for civil power, but also for their own. Left populist parties can come to consider themselves a virtuous vanguard. In the name of righteously progressive reform, they attack the independence of the civil sphere’s communicative and regulative institutions, squirming under the pressure of independent criticism and opposing political and legal claims. In this way, populism moves from supporting expanded democracy to supporting repression; the class or ethnic or religious communities left populists once represented as deserving of civil incorporation become new elites who define exclusionary boundaries in their own name. In Chapter 3, Ateş Altınordu analyzes just such a populist inversion in Turkey. Originally representing the excluded and disempowered Sunni religious majority, the seemingly democratic and civilly oriented AKP promised civil repair and incorporation, its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, hailed as a heroic figure of democratic emancipation. Even as it achieved power and initiated reforms, however, this left populism moved to make Sunni Islam the new core group, primordializing national solidarity in an anticivil way, repressing civil associations, and putting once independent communicative and regulative civil institutions under control of the party state. Nelson Arteaga Botello, in Chapter 4, investigates a similar, if decidedly more secular, process in Mexico. In the name of civil repair, Manuel Lopez Obrador had for decades organized populist challenges to Mexico’s crippling economic inequality, patriarchal politics, and ethnic and racial pollution. After he assumed power in 2018, however, Obrador set about undermining the culture and institutions of Mexico’s civil sphere, restraining independent associations, challenging critical journalism, and instituting controversial social policies that sidestepped electoral institutions. In Chapter 10, Jason Mast demonstrates that it was not only racial othering but a populist challenge to economic inequality and corrupt elites that fueled Donald Trump’s presidential triumph in 2016 (cf. Berezin 2019). After his election, however, Trump deployed his civil capital in the service of harshly anticivil rhetoric, supporting increasingly authoritarian policies. Left populists lead movements that begin as demands for expanding democracy, but once in power, they can consolidate regimes and shape their discourses in ways that constrict and endanger it. This has almost always been the case when left populism equates civil repair with social revolution, as the repeated declension of twentieth-century communism into dictatorship tragically showed (Pérez

2018). As Andrew Junker demonstrates in Chapter 9, moreover, it is also the story of the left populist movements that often continue to convulse revolutionary governments after the dictatorship of the proletariat has been achieved.

Reformist movements that initiate policies to enlarge civil capacity can be understood as “frontlash” movements, occupying a position in social life akin to the role of avant-gardes in art.¹ Leftward social change upends traditional ways of life: the primordial qualities and lifestyles within which civil qualities are experienced and understood; the status elites to whom deference had heretofore been extended; the institutional elites whose competence had guaranteed power and respect. It is along these strained and fearful fault lines that backlash forms. The dialectic of frontlash/backlash is endemic to civil repair and democratic life: Reformation/Counter-Reformation; Enlightenment/anti-Enlightenment; communism/fascism; secularism/fundamentalism; NAACP/Ku Klux Klan. Radically right populist leaders attack the anomie, corruption, and emptiness of modern society, promising to restore solidarity and “the community we have lost” (Enroth, Chapter 8). Nativist, primordial solidarity pushes back against recently incorporated out-groups, such as nonwhites, non-Christians, and nonnationals. Frontlash populism produces backlash populism, whose aim is to constrain, restrict, or roll back the expansions of the civil sphere.

Backlash against progressive changes permeates real existing civil spheres. Conservatism is the rightward movement of a social pendulum that seems, to many, to be swinging dangerously to the left. *Civil* conservatism often has, in fact, the unintended effect of rebalancing a civil sphere, restoring confidence in the existence of a vital center such that frontlash movements live to fight another day. Conservative theorists from Burke (2009 [1790]) to Oakeshott (1975) cautioned against the dangers of radical social change in favor of more incremental and measured forms of civil repair, but such concerns for maintaining a vital center are not exclusive to the right. In the middle of the frontlash whirlwind of the 1960s, the rock ’n’ roll group Buffalo Springfield warned in a hit song against “battle lines being drawn,” singing “nobody’s right if everybody’s wrong.” Describing “a thousand people in the street, singing songs and carrying signs, [who] mostly say, hooray for our side,” the rockers cautioned radical protestors, “it’s time we stop, children, what’s that sound, everybody look what’s going down” (“For What It’s Worth,” 1967). Another immensely popular act, Simon & Garfunkel, cautioned “slow down, you move too fast” (“Feelin’ Groovy,” 1966). Two tumultuous years later, the Beatles sang, “you say you want a revolution, well, you know, we all want to change the world. . . . You

INTRODUCTION

say you got a real solution, well, you know . . . we're doing the best we can," concluding, "all I can tell you is brother you'll have to wait" ("Revolution," 1968).

For right populism as for left, it is a question of how far, how fast? Backlash populism can become determinately anticivil, moving not just to the right but far to the right, reducing civil standing to core group status, polluting those who until recently were outsiders, inciting street violence, and establishing authoritarian regimes that do not just modulate but undermine civil values and institutions. In Chapter 8, Henrik Enroth describes the movement from a "slow down, you move too fast" conservative response to Swedish social democracy, which seemingly endorsed civil values even while redefining them, to a more virulently anti-immigrant, nationalistic, and racist movement that aims to undermine the bounds of Swedish democracy itself. In Chapter 7, Werner Binder shows that the Alternative for Germany (AfD) started as an economically conservative Euroskeptical party, only later becoming transformed into a radical right populist movement that is stridently nationalist, pollutes immigrants, attacks cosmopolitan elites, issues coded anti-Semitic messages ("dog whistles"), and harkens back to Nazi times. In Chapter 5, María Luengo and Małgorzata Kolankowska show how conservative reaction against the Polish Solidarity movement, and the secular, cosmopolitan democracy it created, became an aggressively divisive, radically anticivil force. Acting in the name of the "real Polish people," the PiS has attacked the founding elites of the postcommunist regime, reduced civil solidarity by equating it with primordial bonds of Catholicism and nationalism, and sharply restricted the autonomy of Poland's communicative and regulative institutions. In Chapter 6, Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky describes the Czech Republic as yet another postcommunist European nation that has become engulfed in backlash against civil repair and democratic transformation. Less explicitly racist and more secular than other radical right movements, Czech "center populists" foment an engulfing fear of immigrants in a nation that has actually received scarcely any, a reaction Jaworsky describes as "nativism without immigration."

Endemic to the structure and process of civil spheres, Luengo and Kolankowska suggest (Chapter 5), is a "continuum that stretches from a civil conservative moment to anticivil authoritarian populism." The same continuum stretches to the left as well, from civil progressivism to antidemocratic populism (see Figure 0.1). It is not populism in and of itself but impatience, radicalism, and extremism – and deeply structured blockages to more democratic pathways of repair – that push populist movements to the left and right sides of this continuum, inverting the

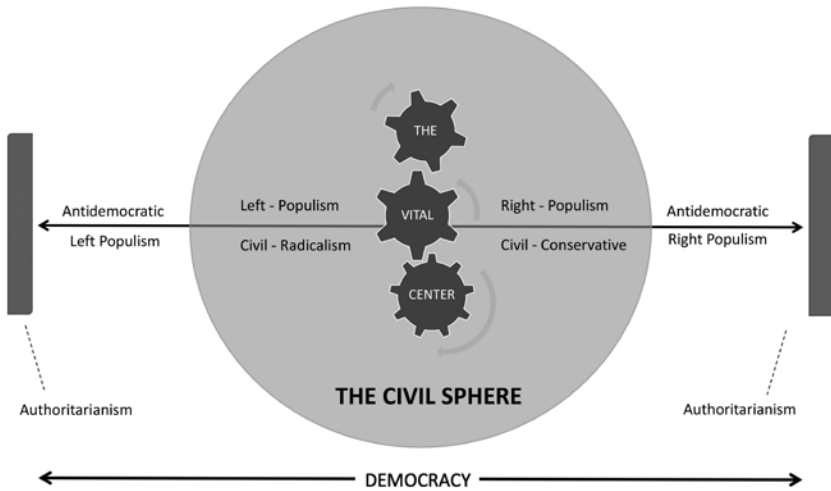


Figure 0.1 *The populist continuum*

sacred and profane sides of the binary discourse of civil society, repressing the autonomy of civil institutions, and endangering the vital center that civil spheres must sustain.

If the chapters that follow delineate the grounding of populism in the contradictions of civil spheres, they also have a great deal to say about the how of populism, not only the what and why. How do the populist performances of protest gain cultural and political success? Nothing is determined; structural change is the emergent result of skillful performances by populist political and cultural actors on the public stage of history. What primes citizen-audiences to welcome antidemocratic performances? What makes them receptive to the inversion of democratic forms?

One reason is the almost entirely neglected phenomenon of transgression (Altınordu, Chapter 3). Influenced by Nietzsche, Georges Bataille (1990 [1957]) argued that breaking free from the restrictive confines of the sacred represents an ever-lurking social temptation (cf. Alexander 2003). As Freud (1961 [1930]) explained, civilization produces deep discontent. Pornography and violence are standards of popular culture. Extremist populism provides an opportunity for audiences to experience the thrill of evil, to “get beyond” what seems to many the boring and routine banality of the everyday.

Another social force that primes citizen-audiences to welcome extreme populism is cultural trauma (Alexander 2011; Eyerman 2019). While frontlash and backlash movements create powerful and embittering expe-

INTRODUCTION

riences of loss, symbolic and material, crucial questions remain: What exactly is the danger? Who are the perpetrators? Who are the victims? Populist movements, their leaders and intellectuals, can be understood as engaging in “trauma work” that addresses such questions in fateful ways. As Luengo and Kolankowska point out in Chapter 5, Polish people experienced severe destabilization in the century and a half after 1795, when Prussia, Russia, and Austria appropriated and partitioned their national territory. After a brief period of independent flourishing in the early twentieth century, the Polish nation was snuffed out once again, first by the Nazis and then by the Soviets. In 1940, the Soviets secretly engineered the mass murder of 22,000 Polish military officers and intelligentsia, a devastating cultural trauma that came to be known as “Katyń” (Bartmanski and Eyerman 2019). Then, only a few years after the rise of Solidarity and the collapse of the USSR allowed the unexpected restoration of Polish independence, the Smolensk air tragedy killed dozens of leading national figures and conservative politicians, including Poland’s president. In the midst of these highly destabilizing events, Luengo and Kolankowska suggest, the fallen president’s twin brother, co-leader of the conservative populist party, organized a cultural-cum-political process that blamed progressive and secular democrats for the trauma, threatening civil institutions, and pushing the government toward the extreme right.

One widely ramifying effect of such trauma work is the inversion of collective memories. As Werner Binder shows (Chapter 7), West Germany’s post-1960s civil sphere had been rooted in memory structures that narrate Nazism as evil, condemn racism, and mandate a radically more democratic government and inclusive solidarity. Portraying Eastern Germans as victims of first Soviet then West German colonization, AfD leaders have performed new memory structures that sacralize the earlier, pre-unification period that Binder calls “pre-postcommunism,” reducing Nazism to the trivial and mundane, a mere blip in the otherwise long and great history of the German nation.

These investigations into populist process are not simple renditions of path dependency. They represent contributions to a cultural sociological model of historical explanation.

Grand theorizing about modernity has been skeptical about the discourse and practice of liberty, viewing it not only as merely formal and empty of moral substance, but also as fueling repressive organizational structures like capitalism and bureaucracy. Reification, commodification, rationalization, egoism and anomie, disciplinary power – such interpretations have been organized around what Ricoeur (1970) described as “the

hermeneutics of suspicion.” In some part, this dark narrative accurately reflects the tragic history of Europe, during which civil spheres, deeply scarred and fragmented, rarely were able to sustain civil control over communicative and regulative institutions. In some other part, however, this narrative reflects a failure of theoretical and normative imagination, a dearth that has, albeit in a very different manner, extended to Anglo-American social theorizing as well. In the United States and the United Kingdom, where democratic life has proved much more durable than in Europe, macrosocial theories about this antirepressive line of modern development are not that easy to find. Pragmatist, microsociological, and mezzo-level institutional theories have not been able to translate the social experience of these democratic societies into persuasive theoretical form.

To effect such translation has been the ambition of CST, inspired by the democratic spirit of pragmatism, informed by European macrotheory, and following the path of the cultural turn. After the Holocaust had transformed genocide into a universal evil, after black civil rights movements in the United States and South Africa had mounted mammoth mobilizations against racial domination, after second-wave feminism had laid down the challenge to patriarchy, CST emerged in the wake of “1989,” as a wave of democratic optimism swept the world. The overthrow of state communism in Central and Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and of right-wing authoritarianism in Latin America, offered an object lesson in liberty. If not the end of history, a new golden age of democracy had surely begun.

But history is cunning, and that new age of equipoise (Burn 1964) proved short-lived. Over the course of the last decade, the third after the magical one launched in 1989, there has been growing moral unease, emotional anxiety, and social instability. Feeding off this combustible bile, antidemocratic movements have flourished, newly liberal governments have become “illiberal democracies,” and, in even the most stable democratic capitalist and social democratic nations, liberty has become threatened.

Civil spheres can be “populized” into antidemocracies, but such transformative destruction does not happen in the blink of an eye. As right-wing and sometimes left-wing forces push backward (or forward) to demagoguery, activists draw from the sustaining cultural and institutional powers of civil spheres and push back. Protecting the vital center, protestors and elites alike defend the autonomy of critical discourse; the right for journalists and legal authorities to make independent interpretations; and the need for civil power, via voting and office, to maintain control over the coercive power of the state. Such resistance is not the

INTRODUCTION

principal focus of these essays, but neither is it neglected. Luengo and Kolankowska (Chapter 5) analyze how, in Poland, a powerful trauma of democratic regeneration was triggered by the political assassination of the liberal, antipopulist mayor of Gdansk. Arteaga Botello (Chapter 4) reconstructs the antipopulist narrations of Mexico's centrist and conservative newspapers facing the rise of Obrador. Villegas (Chapter 2) documents how the Philippine middle class has become a carrier for civil authority and has vigorously resisted both right and left populism in recent decades. Binder (Chapter 7) shows that German support for radical right populism has mostly been confined to the traumatized, disgruntled, mostly Eastern minority. Portraying Tony Blair's New Labour as a neoliberal backlash movement against civil incorporation, Morgan (Chapter 1) shows how, in the 2017 UK national elections, Jeremy Corbyn's felicitous performance of left populism made a surprisingly successful case for civil repair.

Engaging in social performances to expose the defects of contemporary civil spheres is what populism is all about. The danger is that such protests against injustice will become concentrated in a single leader and party. The representation of civil capacity must be disbursed among the communicative and regulative institutions that filter, pluralize, and agonistically specify the principles that allow incorporation and exclusion. For, as John Dewey (1966 [1916]: 87) argued over a century ago, "more than a form of government," democracy is "primarily a mode of associational living, of conjoint communicated experience."

Note

- 1 Here and elsewhere in this Introduction, I draw from Alexander (2019b).

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Populism's Cultural and Civil Dynamics

Marcus Morgan

This chapter interrogates dominant definitions of “populism” found in the social sciences, focusing on the term’s conceptual utility in understanding recent changes in Western politics. Though populism is typically treated as a deviant form of politics, this chapter finds that it in fact holds remarkable continuities with conventional politics, and indeed culture more generally. It argues that these more general cultural processes can be illuminated by cultural sociology, just as the more specific but still routine political processes can be illuminated by civil sphere theory (CST). The chapter goes on to argue that when populism is understood as a formal mode of public signification, rather than a substantive ideology, the substance it signifies becomes crucial to determining its civility. It suggests that while populism can certainly have anticivil effects, there is nothing inherent in it that precludes it from also acting to promote civil repair.

Populism: Politics as Usual

One way of characterizing “culture” is as an ever-evolving repository of efforts toward meaning-making. Meaning-making reduces complexity so that communication – and, if successful, understanding – can take place. Politics likewise aims toward reducing complexity so as to legitimate efforts to shift, or maintain, power relations. This chapter will suggest that what has been called “populism” may exaggerate these processes but does not break from them. CST teaches us how this reduction of complexity typically takes place on the basis of organizing meaning around a binary structure of motives, relationships, and institutions (Alexander 2006: 53–67). This chapter will argue that populism is unique only

in its accentuation of these binaries; its drawing of an explicit frontier between a construction of the “people” – in progressive populism one that is inclusively defined, in regressive populism exclusively so (Judis 2016) – and an “elite” (Laclau 2005; Mouffe and Errejón 2016; Mouffe 2018); its development of polarization; its provocation to an audience to decide on which side of the boundary it chooses to stand; and its invitation toward this audience to actively participate in the unfolding political drama, typically through direct, rather than representative, democratic mechanisms.

While the chapter agrees that useful definitions exclude as much as possible to increase their conceptual grasp, it argues that the difficulty of coming up with a tight, restrictive definition of “populism” is that it is not as tight, restrictive, or discrete a phenomenon as most academic or journalistic accounts present it as being. Rather, populism is best understood as an intensification of routine political dynamics, which are themselves part and parcel of more generalized cultural mechanisms through which social signification takes place; group identities are forged in relation to those they oppose; and collective agency is mobilized in the process. Populism can therefore be understood within CST, which can itself be understood as following the structures and dynamics of meaning-making illuminated by cultural sociology. From this perspective, different examples of political behavior come to be seen as more or less populist by degree, rather than populist or not by categorization.

The chapter reviews five key features shared across dominant definitions: populism’s binary logic, its ideological nature, its moralism, its antirationalism, and its antipluralism. It both critiques each feature’s definitional centrality and stresses each feature’s continuities with “conventional” politics, demonstrating how populism functions in ways that CST, and cultural sociology, would expect it to. The chapter concludes that populism is compatible with both progressive and regressive political programs, and indeed suggests that if certain criteria are met, there is nothing precluding it from playing a similar role to the social movements described in Part III of *The Civil Sphere* (Alexander 2006) in translating restricted political grievances into more universal civil issues, in the process initiating civil repair. Overall, the chapter argues against the independence not only of populism, but also of politics more generally, from culture. It suggests that beyond violence and coercion, though frequently even within these, power, and the struggles that take place over it, must be seen as operating always and everywhere through culture.

Populism as a Binary

Attempts to define populism have a long, fraught, and inconclusive history (e.g., Berlin et al. 1968; Ionescu and Gellner 1969). So much so that many sociologists have deemed it wisest to set the ill-defined term aside (e.g., Jansen 2011). Events over the past few years have, however, predictably propelled the concept back into academic and public prominence. Though the phenomenon is arguably ancient, the term itself was first used to describe two political movements that appeared at the end of the nineteenth century: in Tsarist Russia, a largely unsuccessful effort at mobilizing peasants against feudal exploitation, and in the United States, the movement of mainly farmworkers who rose up to challenge, via the People's Party, what they conceived of as an elite of bankers, railway owners, and the two-party system of government. In a similar sequence of events to that witnessed with the term more recently, it was first used as a pejorative in the US context, but was then quickly reappropriated by those it was intended to deride. Although some prominent observers argue that the movement around the American People's Party fails the test of a genuine populism (e.g., Müller 2016: 88), there is fairly broad consensus that one feature it illustrates – a politics built around a dualistic opposition between an “elite” and some conception of a “people,” with whom legitimate democratic power belongs – is the basis on which a minimal definition might be agreed upon (e.g., Kriesi 2014; Bonikowski and Gidron 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018).

However, while the basic notion that “the binary structure of populist claims is largely invariant” (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016: 7) may apply to left-wing populisms, it is not so clear that it holds for right-wing variants. Judis describes how while left-wing populism conforms to dominant definitions in its “dyadic” structure, consisting of “a vertical politics of the bottom and middle arrayed against the top,” right-wing populism, by contrast, is “triadic,” in that such “populists champion the people against an elite that they accuse of coddling a third group” (2016: 15).¹ This third group is typically a minority, often an immigrant group or some other relatively powerless scapegoat, revealing an exclusivist – i.e. nonuniversalizing and therefore noncivil – deployment of the “people” in such types of populism.

Definitions based upon the binary criterion also assume there is such a thing as a large-scale politics attempting to win the electoral consent of a polity that does not rely upon some construction of the “people.” This assumption is questionable. Democracy is, after all, supposed to be a

system in which a people rule (*demos-kratos*), and even in nondemocratic or “formally democratic” systems, lip service is usually paid to this idea to ensure legitimation (Habermas 1976: 36–7). To operate effectively, such a system must therefore presumably decide who this “people” are. Laclau (2005, 2006) has famously argued that constructing a people constitutes the essence of what politics is. Others have suggested that state-formation itself was only possible through determining a “people” (Skinner 2009: 328; Peel 2018). In republics, “the people” is typically so central to grounding democracy that it becomes the cornerstone of constitutions, as in “we, the people.” In exclusionary right-wing manifestations, “naming the people” is also used, but in this instance, as a means of excluding the “third group” that Judis identifies, justifying the conviction that this group, which is not part of the essentialized “people,” is therefore undeserving of political representation. In technocracies, the “people” are also implicitly constructed, but in this iteration, often as in need of the enlightened guidance of experts, on the assumption that the people are unqualified to govern themselves.

Liberal politics is hardly immune, although it typically conceives itself as being so. This can be illustrated by the recent calls for a “People’s Vote” on Brexit in the United Kingdom. The use of the term “people” here, as in the slogan of the largest march – “Put it to the People” – and in the frequent reference to the number of people on street demonstrations, is unmistakably populist. However, it is arguably a populism against populism; a populism that emerged when a mechanism of direct democracy – a people’s referendum on leaving the European Union (EU) – failed to go the way that liberal antipopulists, who generally defend a more representative notion of democracy, had proposed, a matter that was in part blamed on the populist mold in which organized Euroskepticism took shape. More direct democracy was the liberal answer to direct democracy gone awry: we need to listen more to the people – another referendum is required to establish what the people *really* think.

Whether or not there is a paradoxical tension between democracy and populism, as some theorists claim (e.g., Urbinati 2017), there is perhaps a simple cultural reason why it is so hard to imagine a politics that does not construct a people. This is that political life, like cultural life more generally, tends to organize itself around either/or distinctions, which, when it comes to issues of large-scale group identity, translate into distinguishing between an “us” and a “them.” In democratic systems (or, as mentioned above, often in nondemocratic ones too), since the “people” is the chief democratic category, who is and who is not part of the people becomes paramount. Awareness of the social organization