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Article

Crisis and Populism: The role of crisis management and exploitation

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between populism and crisis and highlights its symbiotic character. It outlines some of the debates around the conception of crisis and populism and discusses the critical role of crisis management and exploitation, as an internal strategy for populist actor to interest and attain support. While external causal mechanism could explain the emergence and performance of populist actors in a crisis framed environment, what this article argues is that populism and crisis are overarching, placing crisis management and exploitation as essential theoretical contribution to understanding further populism.

Just within less than two decades, the world has been experiencing an era of constant crises; from the economic crisis that erupted in 2008 that led to the eurozone sovereign-debt crisis, to the EU crisis that followed the UK's vote to Brexit, to the refugee crisis of 2015 emerging from the confluence of conflicts in the Middle East, to a more recent health crisis of Covid-19 pandemic, and a culmination of democratic back-sliding, raising a debate on a possible ongoing crisis of democracy. The latter has brought populism to the centre of the discussions at an academic level and in the broader societal audience due to the observation that crisis and the rise of populism are intertwined. The existing scholarship on populism has constantly been expanding, reflecting the steady growth of populist actors across the globe; from transforming democracies in Latin America since the early 1990s (Weyland, 2013; Levitsky & Roberts, 2011) to the populist far-right in the early 2000s in Europe (Betz & Immerfall, 1998; Mudde, 2007) and from the newer expressions of inclusionary populism that occurred after the economic crisis of 2008 (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser,

2013), to Brexit and Trump and the menace of nationalist populism (Inglehart & Norris, 2016) and the populism in post-communist context (Pirro, 2013).

The emergence of populism has sparked a debate regarding its definition and raised the issue of the ambivalent relationship between populism and democracy. The latter pinpoints the need to identify populist breakthrough and persistence causal mechanisms in different environments. The multiple and variable explanations of the effect of populism spurred a level of confusion and disagreement among scholars when it comes to comprehending this phenomenon and its impact on democracy, with studies urging deluging effects and others calling for no concerns. However broad the debate is, though, including among other issues of definition, use of the term, strategies of measurement, causes and consequences, a shared thought underlines every discussion: populism has changed politics on a fundamental level.

The literature on populism has been focusing on two main dimensions, the popular sovereignty (*volonté générale*, power to the authentic, neglected and deserving people) and the anti-establishment (a critique of the systemic elite). These two dimensions create a frame offered to explain the rejection and abandonment of mainstream parties by the voters and underline a division in the society into two homogenous and antagonistic groups: the ‘*vox populi*’ and the ‘corrupt elite’ (Mudde, 2004). Moreover, while populism has extensively been seen as crisis-ridden (Pappas & Kriesi, 2015) in an effort to identify the reasons for the growing success of populist actors, the associations between populism and crisis remain still under-theorised (Moffitt, 2015). This literature gap does not refer to how populist actors emerge in a period of crisis but rather to how they strategically manage and utilise crisis and its notion per se and radicalise their discourse to exploit the situation and attract the voters’ attention.

To explore this further, the first and second parts of this article examine the relationship between populism and crisis, outlining some of the debates around the conception of crisis and populism. The last part puts forward the need for a critical role in the conciliation of dominant approaches to crisis management. This article argues that to understand populism further, it is not enough to comprehend the external causal mechanisms that could explain the emergence and performance of populist actors in a crisis-framed environment. Instead, it is also necessary to identify the ambivalent role of crisis management and exploitation as an internal strategy of the populist actors in order to interest and attain support. Moreover, in the communication phase of crises, populists not only create narratives but also, at the same time they undermine the existing political leadership as crises require a coherent and unchallenged narrative. In doing so, the article seeks to fill the gap in the literature on populism and its relationship to crisis by suggesting crisis management and exploitation as essential theoretical addition to understanding populism further.

Populism: an abundance of definitions

The term populism is built on the idea that the people are the ground of authority of the state and are the ones to legitimise and retrieve the power from the government, and it can be traced to the theory of popular sovereignty (Ochoa Espejo, 2011). The term came to use in the 19th century to describe

political movements, among others, such as the *narodniki* in Russia, the agrarian movements in central and eastern Europe in the early 20th century, the US People's Party in the mid-19th century and Boulangism in France in the late 19th century. Despite their differences, movements of this period share the common notion of the ordinary 'people', as a mobilising force against the establishment, to a more communitarian model of democracy, bringing politics closer to the people. In the early-mid 20th century, populism started emerging in Latin America; a phase referred to as 'classic populism' (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014). In a period where the effects of the economic crisis and the depression in the 1930s, in which Latin American countries also faced a significant economic decline, labour populist movements started emerging in an effort to mobilise against the oligarchs' attempt for state incorporation (Collier & Collier, 1991). Until the 1980s, populism remained relatively marginal in postwar Europe, with some exceptions, e.g. the Poujade in France, that is until the 1990s when populism re-emerged dynamically, both in Europe and across the Atlantic in Latin America, both as responses to notions of democracy. From Europe, as a way to show dissatisfaction towards the political and corrupted elite to Latin America as part of the reform, from military ruling to democratic regimes, the relationship between populism and democracy became a primary focus rapidly in the academic literature, highlighting the ambivalence of both concepts.

Since the 1950s, scholarship on populism started to advance, with Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (2017) distinguishing it in three different spheres: societal problems, national and regional contexts, and defining the concept itself. From Dahl's (1956) polyarchy (system responsive to popular sovereignty) to Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) radical democracy (populism as an emancipatory force) to Dornbusch and Sachs (1991) macroeconomic approach (populism as irresponsible economic policy), what becomes apparent is that, as Canovan puts it, variants of populism are 'not reducible to a single core' (1981:298), something that confirms the contested nature of the concept even in the more recent scholarship (Taggart, 2000).

Defining populism is still an open and ongoing debate, e.g. in terms of content, origins, and consequences (Aslanidis, 2016). Among the theoretical propositions that define populism, among others, one can also find: discourse (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), thin-centred ideology (Mudde, 2004), style (Moffit & Tormey, 2014), political strategy (Weyland, 2001), a conception of democracy (Pappas, 2016). As Rooduijn (2014) underlines, different characteristics can apply depending on how the concept is conceived, e.g. centralisation of the leader, polarisation, exclusionism, communication style and language, and a proclamation of a crisis (578), contributing to the divergence of the concept. One of the first observations on populism was made by Laclau (1977) in *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism*, which focused on the discursive construction of populist appeals, identifying two criteria: a central reference to "the people" and an equivalent, antagonistic discursive logic' (Stavrakakis, 2004:259). While Laclau's study continues to inform the scholarship on populism, his theory is perceived as abstract and normative, failing to provide concrete means of operationalising indicators in

order to be able to build comparative methodological instruments of measurements.

Focusing on the importance of ideas, a popular classification comes from Mudde, who defines populism as a thin-centred ideology that ‘considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people (2004:543). Mudde’s definition focuses on four key concepts: ideology, the people, the elite, and the general will, adding the notion of morality versus interest. Drawing from Freedman’s (1998) morphological approach to ideology, in which a thin-centred ideology is described as one that ‘severs itself from wider ideational contexts, by the deliberate removal and replacement of concepts’, exhibiting ‘a restricted core attached to a narrower range of political concept (750), what Mudde (2017) suggests is that populism can attach to thick/host ideologies, e.g. communism, nationalism, liberalism etc., without though presenting solutions to socio-political issues per se explicitly, but most likely offer a piece of advice on how to conduct politics. One of the most significant contributions of the ideological approach is that it makes populism measurable in dissimilar empirical studies, offering distinctions not only in order to distinguish whether political actors are populist or not (‘either-or’) but also offers the tools to construct a categorisation within the concept by establishing taxonomical criteria of levels of populism (‘more or less’) (ibid:35-36), enabling comparative methodological applications.

For Weyland (2001), in a more organisational approach, populism is seen as a political strategy that leaders use to mobilise voters, focusing not on what the discourse is but on patterns of political behaviour and the actual relationship between the leader and the supporters, in the process of the leader to obtain and sustain power. In this approach, the role of the leader is essential, as the leader directly addresses the supporters in order to create bonds in a non-institutionalised way, preceding formal organisational intermediations. Challenging the idea that ‘the people constitute a homogenous group, this tactic emphasises the impression of direct contact, that can lead to a strong sense of belonging and a strong commitment towards the leader themselves, and underlines charismatic and personalistic leadership as an extending feature of populism, an aspect that the ideology-centred definitions often neglect to see as defining (Weyland, 2017).

However, the approaches presented above seem to miss exploring the discourse of populism, which could provide an additional layer of understanding of the concept itself and, therefore, be able to identify a political actor as populist sufficiently. For Laclau (1980), discourse is ‘an ensemble of the phenomena in and through which social production of meaning takes place (86). Having this in mind, the socio-cultural and politico-cultural components are also important to be examined in relation to populism. Ostiguy (1999) explores this approach by highlighting the notion of populism as relational (between supporters and the leader vs the Other), something that contributes to the construction of identities. In his high-low axis model, the socio-cultural dimension encompasses, e.g., others dressing, manners, vocabulary, and ways of

speaking, and the politico-cultural dimension refers to forms of leadership and methods of decision making (1999:5-9), in which populism is characterised by 'flaunting of the low'. Aslanidis (2016), on the other hand, emphasises the role of frames in terms of social mobilisation, perceiving populism as a discursive frame resonating directly from the content of populist discourse. While all the approaches above offer a compelling platform for comparative empirical analysis, in different ways, the variety of populist examples throughout the globe still contribute to the need for additional sub-dimensions and accommodating theories to be included when examining populism. For the purposes of this article, following Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (2017) spheres, three specific approaches to populism were discussed: ideological, organisational and cultural. Looking closer to the approaches provided above, several elements arise that could explain a linkage between populism and crisis, elaborating on the management and exploitation of the crisis from populist actors. Before though building on the theoretical framework that brings these concepts together, crisis per se needs to be discussed.

Crisis: not a discernible cause

Koselleck (2006) underlines the abundance of debate on conceptualising crisis. A common line of agreement within the literature identifies crisis as a disruptive phase, in which crisis refers to a situation that is both unexpected and undesirable, marking a 'phase of disorder in the seemingly normal development of a system' (Boin et al., 2005:2). As a result of an occurring crisis, ordinary operating ways no longer apply. At the same time, notions of threat are created, e.g. to the core community values and structures, along with a sense of urgency, as the situation needs to be treated instantly and a feeling of uncertainty, e.g. its cause, nature, and consequences, all of which have an impact of people's understanding of the situation surrounding them (Boin et al., 2009:81-83).

Hence, crises create environments that can impose constraints but that can also allow an opportunity to arise for prominent policy agenda propositions and reform. In Kingdon's (1995) view, in a primary agenda-setting approach, in a crisis (focusing event) where a problem manifests, a need arises in order to address the issue and provide solutions to the problem, producing 'open windows' of discretion and opportunity for policy entrepreneurs to pursue policy change. In the effort to manage not only the crisis, therefore, the problem itself, leaders (authority holders and opposition) are also required to manage the expectations and perceptions of the public. Furthermore, as the process of evolution of the system changes, the process of reform also fluctuates and can divert from ordinary procedural means.

Kreuder-Sonner (2018), when discussing the constraints and opportunities crises create, highlights numerous possible effects of the three dimensions of the crisis that were mentioned above, threat, urgency and uncertainty. Among others, these possible effects can include the adoption of intrusive measures that in a non-crisis environment would be difficult to attain; the issue salience can be increased along with the public sensitivity to political discourse on the matter, something that can consequently undermine the quality of the

public and media debate and create issues of transparency regarding the decision making process. As well, it can also raise questions of representation and interpretation as responsibilities might be challenging to attribute in an environment where the causes and consequences of the crisis can still be unknown and unidentified – what Boin et al. (2005:4) call an ‘impossible condition’. Moreover, while the literature is mainly focusing on policy change, the effect of a crisis in terms of representation can be perceived as an urging matter to explore in terms of crisis management and exploitation as it can affect, in a broader sense of casting opportunity, central political change of, e.g. in institutions, parties, structures.

Additionally, crises’ subtleties can have numerous outcomes in the politics they occur. Furthermore, as the existing literature focuses on the agenda-setting effect that requires urgent action, e.g. financial crisis of 2008 (Masters & ‘t Hart, 2012) or long-term crises such as climate change (Vasilescu, 2007) or event-driven crisis as gun control (Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2013), what is yet to be discussed is the contingent nature of a crisis and its variable impacts (Birkland, 2006). When discussing crisis, the literature on crisis management highlights an objective notion that focuses on the exogenously given facts that marked the crisis. However, what is equally important is the notion of intersubjective perception (Kreuder-Sonner, 2018) that accompanies it, along with the relationship between ideological change and crisis (Blyth, 2002), as they both play an essential role in framing and interpreting crisis in social reality. The following section focuses on how studying crisis inducted framing is essential to understand how political actors strategically manage the crisis, putting forward the necessity to start thinking of crisis not as something external to populism but also as how populism internalises crisis in an effort to increase the effectiveness of its performance.

Management and exploitation: Crisis inducted framing and populism

Whether having populist actors proclaim it or whether an actual crisis occurs, populism and crisis have often been connected in the literature in an ambivalent way. Laclau, from his early works, underlines the connection between populism and crisis, arguing that ‘the emergence of populism is historically linked to a crisis of the dominant ideological discourse, which in turn is part of more general social crisis’ (1977:175) while claiming that crisis can even be a precondition for populism (2005). Laclau discusses crisis in terms of ideological discourse and representation as a root of any populist, anti-institutional outburst (2005:139). This position can be traced back to Gramsci’s (1971) argument on the representational notion of crisis, in which he discusses crisis with regard to hegemony and mobilisation. As the ruling hegemony fails to respond to public demands, or as the public mobilises against the ruling hegemony, a ‘crisis of authority is spoken of’ (210). On a similar note, Stavrakakis (2005) relates the emergence of new discourses and new identities to the ‘dislocation or crisis of previously hegemonic discursive orders’ (247).

The above approaches discuss crisis as something though external to populism, something that Moffitt (2015) puts into challenge, highlighting the importance of acknowledging the ‘performance of crisis as an internal feature

of populism' (190). Moreover, Taggart (2000) discusses populism and crisis and the role of leadership, Roberts (1995) claims that populism surges stronger in contexts of crisis or profound social transformations, whilst Tormey and Moffitt (2014) connect populism not just concerning a breakdown between citizens and their representatives, but also concerning issues of, e.g. migration, military threat, social change etc. These examples add to the position of Laclau, in which crisis is a precondition for the emergence of populist actors, as it provides them with an opportunity to emerge and 'sweep away the detritus of the past and usher in a new social order' (Roberts, 1995:113).

This article takes further Moffitt's position by suggesting that crisis exploitation theory and strategies be used as explanatory for the performance of populist actors. In a crisis, political actors compete over 'a social meaning of an issue domain' (Schön & Rein, 1994: 29) in an attempt to reduce the three notions that a crisis creates. However, sole the intensity and the scope of a crisis does not determine the level of these notions, as one would expect; there is also a considerable extent of how crisis is initially interpreted. Shaping the public's understanding of a crisis consequently contributes to building public support and improving political performances. Crisis management is a process that defines the exploitation and communication strategy, from framing a crisis to constructing a discourse that explains its causes and who is it to be blamed, but also ways to be resolved (Boin et al. 2009). With the core idea of populism lying on the distinction of us versus them, a crisis offers the opportunity to create a 'them' anti-establishment/corrupt/elite discourse to flourish, e.g. as the ones responsible or the ones failing to respond effectively (supply) against the mobilisation of 'us' that is here to offer solutions and include/organise/support those that have been ignored (demand) by the ruling establishment (Roberts, 2015).

Reflecting on the definitions of populism as presented above, this article argues that an understanding of the relationship between crisis and populism can be found in their conceptualisation. The constructed model in Boin et al.'s (2009) work pinpoints different strategies based on the nature of crises as a framing contest. Following this approach, identifying an actor's ideas, values and positions, along with the perception and interpretation of a crisis, define how a crisis is exploited. Therefore, in an ideological approach, an actor's ideology defines the actor's stance in a time of crisis. In the case of populism, where crisis is seen as an opportunity, according to the authors, the political stance is focused on blame, and a policy stance is to attack the status quo (2009:84), in line with the two dimension of populism (popular sovereignty and anti-establishment). As in populism, the role of leadership is also crucial in crisis, as it is leaders that need to decide on the management strategy, not only in the incubation stage of a crisis but also in the inception and the repercussion of it, what Boin et al. call five critical tasks: sense-making, decision making, meaning-making, terminating, and learning (2009). In an organisational approach, this strategy can provide indicators on the effects of crisis exploitation on the political actors, leadership itself, and the effects on institutions and reform.

Additionally, crisis management requires a strategic exploitation to allow

leaders in their effort 'to minimise the impact of adversity, deal with the social and political consequences, and restore public faith in the future (Boin et al. 2009). However, populism might not necessarily strive for stability, and leadership in societies can be found in many shapes or forms. Having said that, in democracies, leaders are not just the institutionalised ones and aim to explore how and why populists manage to achieve those leadership challenges. Therefore, in a situation where different leaderships offer different narratives and create different frames, the way populists plan their strategy around crisis framing warfare is essential. Finally, discourse itself in both populism and crisis concepts is highlighted. In a cultural approach, in both populism and crisis, framing is involved in the creation of perceived realities in which political actors promote, interpret, evaluate and recommend their stands to the public. Thus, despite the differences between these approaches, or whether there is a causality or not in regards to populism and crisis, crisis as an external variable can provide an explanation of the effect and affect it has on the development of populism. While Moffitt (2015) distinguishes crisis between external and internal, this article suggests that there is not a clear distinction, and both aspects are interconnected to understand the relationship between the concepts. Additionally, a crisis is a prime field for a populist actors to establish themselves, but in order to establish themselves, they need to undermine the formal leadership crisis-management attempts deepening the crisis along the way.

Conclusion

No matter the form of the crisis, e.g. conflict, natural disaster, or economic recession, citizens turn to their leaders for solutions. As mentioned above, the response to a crisis is essential, as it can limit the damage/impact, but when that response fails, the crisis impact increases. Crises create disturbances and transitional phases and can lead to other crises as an effect, e.g. conflict to migration, economical to societal etc. So although crisis manifests as a deviation in political trajectory, it is also situated within the continuity of routine actions and activities, and therefore, crisis management is inherent in daily politics. As commented above, a crisis creates new opportunities not only for existing political actors, but also provides a fertile ground for new actors to emerge, something that can be seen as a deviation against the mainstream, established political scene.

Populism and its causes are still highly challenged in current literature. What populist actors achieve to do is the re-politicisation of specific issues and polarisation of the political debate through radicalised discourse and via an increase of opportunistic use of plebiscitary instruments and narratives weakening non-majoritarian institutions, ultimately posing significant effects on the liberal democracy. What populist actors manage to achieve is highlight important issues not adequately addressed by the elites, with the latter being perceived as all the same. In contrast, people have more efficacy, and therefore a, cognitive mobilisation is anticipated as essential.

As discussed above, although to some extent, populism is referred as reactionary and anti-systemic discourse nourished by crisis, and is connected to crisis in an ambivalent way, crisis is not enough as a precondition for the

emergence of populism, nor can it be reduced solely to crisis. The ideological positions crystallise the political discourses with their various tones, but with various crises, the populist actors develop different discourses to attract a new audience, while at the same time, the diversification of discourse could challenge the maintaining of their original-traditional 'audience'. This creates further opportunities for research in order to explore whether, despite the fact that crisis provides some opportunities for populist actors, ideological tenants are more credible than the crisis itself.

Populism and crisis are overarching. In order to build on the way crisis management and exploitation are an essential theoretical contribution to further understanding populism, what needs to be explored is how populist actors exploit crisis to their benefit to explain their performance. Additionally, another critical aspect that is yet to be explored in the literature is to focus not only on the emergence of populism in times of crisis but also the ways populism manages to stay in the political landscape and maintain its presence during a period of time where multiple crises swing, and how populists manage to shift the discourse and framing in order to fit the current crisis. This can provide an additional understanding of crisis exploitation management and create a methodological measurement approach to crisis responsiveness.

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