

Populists as Strangers:
How the ‘politics of the extraordinary’ challenges
representative democracy in Europe

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Abstract

This paper elaborates on the idea that populist actors simultaneously seek and are considered to be ‘different’ from ‘ordinary’ democratic politics. Drawing in particular on Simmel’s notion of the ‘stranger’, I argue that contemporary populism in Europe is best conceived of as a balanced strategy rooted in everyday performances of *extraordinariness* in relation to the representative-democratic order. These performances intentionally oscillate between the poles of sameness and difference, closeness and distance, and radical change and stability. Together, they constitute the *populist politics of the extraordinary*, which I illustrate with reference to examples from European populisms. I conclude that instead of disregarding, promoting, or combating this strategy, a democratic response needs to disrupt populist politics in an equally complex and sophisticated manner.

Keywords

populism, representative democracy, extraordinary, strategy, performance

1. Introduction

1.1 ‘Populists’ and ‘outsiders’ in European politics

In their discussion of contemporary politics, academics, journalists, and activists alike often use the terms ‘populist’ and ‘outsider’ in conjunction with one another, or even as synonyms. For example, in *The Atlantic*, Stathis Kalyvas observed in May 2017 that the Greek “populist experiment” with the radical left Syriza as a government party had failed. This, he argued, was due to the party’s “abysmal incompetence”, simultaneously originating in and clashing with its claims to being political outsiders “untainted by corruption” who would be able to stand up to the country’s creditors (Kalyvas, 2017). For Matthew Goodwin (2018), the results of the Italian general election in March 2018, which led to a coalition government of the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the Lega (Nord), were “a *fešta* of successful insurgent outsiders, overturned insiders, and anti-establishment populism” (original emphasis), signalling a political shift towards the ‘right’.

Similarly, the *New York Times* correspondent Patrick Kingsley (2018) commented two months before the April 2018 Hungarian elections that the prime minister, Viktor Orbán, had “often been cast as an unruly outsider—a loud, populist voice peripheral to the mainstream, and peripheral to real power”, but had now possibly become the EU’s “greatest political challenge”. In a *Guardian* video with the revealing title “Why the World Loves a Political Outsider”, Serbian political activist Srđan Popović argued in April 2015 that “outsiders”, such as Syriza and the Spanish left-wing party Podemos, were so appealing because they demonstrated that established parties and political norms could indeed be challenged and ultimately replaced, albeit with questionable long-term success (Monzani, 2015).

Finally, in his recent book *The Rise of the Outsiders*, British political columnist and broadcaster Steve Richards holds that outsider parties and populist leaders strictly opposed to the ‘centrist liberal-democratic mainstream’ would present their limited political experience as a virtue instead of hiding it as a sign of incompetence—but, again, without long-term success (Richards, 2018, pp. 23-24).

This media discourse reflects recent developments in the political science literature (to which many of the authors just mentioned also contribute), where the terms “populist” and “outsider” often appear in tandem as well, with the conceptual differences between them being spelt out more or less clearly. Kenney, writing against the background of a series of unexpected election results in Latin America during the 1990s, distinguishes between outsiders and anti-party (i.e., anti-elite) politicians, using the criteria of position/experience and discourse vis-à-vis the national party system as a basis (1998, p. 59). Barr picks up on this argument, saying that populists—actors who make anti-elite appeals to the electorate and seek to improve accountability through singular leadership—often also happen to be outsiders, i.e. actors who are marginal and/or independent in relation to the existing political system. This is because the latter are particularly well placed to

engage in such anti-establishment politics (2009, p. 38; see also Carreras, 2012). Following this line of argument, Luther (2011) considers the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) to be both a right-wing populist and an outsider party, given that it was excluded from federal government for a long time after its establishment in 1956 due to its members' lack of political experience and "anti-establishment rhetoric" (see also McDonnell and Newell, 2011); for Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser, Venezuela's former President Hugo Chávez was "a populist outsider with a radical discourse against the two preponderant parties" (2017, p. 4).

1.2 Populism, representative democracy, and the extraordinary

The value of such debates for comparative politics notwithstanding, this paper takes a different approach to the proposed link between the concepts of 'populists' and 'outsiders'. Rather than taking issue with any conceptual or empirical differences between the two, it suggests that their concomitant appearance in both media and academic discourses about European politics points to something bigger: the status of contemporary populism as a political strategy for gaining and maintaining political power by performing 'extraordinariness' vis-à-vis the representative-democratic system.

The 'populist politics of the extraordinary' actively pursues a strategy of disrupting representative democracy, thereby transforming it from within.

As the examples above show, commentators generally agree that populists are, and want to be seen as, different from 'ordinary' representative democratic politics (Canovan, 1999, p. 6; de la Torre, 2016, p. 122; Brubaker, 2017, p. 380). This is based on their anti-establishment (rather than anti-incumbent) appeals, their claim that they are better representatives because they lack previous experience in the 'established system'—or, if they do have experience, have not been 'contaminated' by it—and their promise to radically change that very system.

In this context, the notion of the 'extraordinary' has begun to appear in the ever-expanding literature on contemporary populism, but so far has rarely been studied systematically. As I will show, being extraordinary—or rather, performing extraordinariness—is more than one element of a populist political style, as Moffitt (2016; see also Schoor, 2017) has recently argued. Instead, it can be understood as the core of a populist strategy for gaining and maintaining political power that manifests itself in various programmatic, discursive, and aesthetic ways.

This implies that what we are currently witnessing in Europe and elsewhere is more than a competition between technocrats and populists at the two extreme ends of a style continuum (Moffitt, 2016, p. 46). Rather than just presenting or doing politics in a 'different' way, I suggest that the 'populist politics of the extraordinary' actively pursues a strategy of disrupting representative democracy, thereby transforming it from within. This has important implications for how we may respond to the phenomenon.

The paper reconsiders the relationship between populism and representative democracy by viewing it through the lens of the following dimensions of populists' 'extraordinariness', all of which are touched upon in the populism literature:

- A) populists as 'extraordinary strangers' in the representative-democratic system;
- B) populists' 'extraordinary' mode of representation based on the construction of interlocked relations of closeness to and distance from 'the people'; and
- C) populists' responses to and constructions of 'times of extraordinary change' vis-à-vis the representative-democratic order.

Bringing these different dimensions conceptually closer together provides the basis for a comprehensive analysis of everyday populist performances of the 'extraordinary' in representative-democratic systems.

While there are multiple populisms whose exact shape depends on the context in which they emerge and the ideological form they take, the discussion below seeks to abstract from these

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particularities—although it will inevitably be right-wing populism heavy, as right-wing populism continues to dominate the political agenda in Europe. In any case, key to the account developed here is an understanding of populism as strategy, combined with the idea that populism is not merely an 'appeal', but is being 'done' on an everyday basis, building on the recent 'performative turn' in populism studies (Jansen, 2011; Moffitt, 2016).

The paper is divided into four parts. Following this introduction, the second section defines the key assumptions that underlie the subsequent argument by explaining why I approach populism as a political strategy in representative democracies and how I conceive of its relationship to political discourse and style. The third part reconsiders debates in the literature regarding the interplay between popular sovereignty, representation, and change in populist politics to develop the notion of the 'populist politics of the extraordinary'. It argues that what has taken centre stage in Europe is not so much a political battle between representative democracy and populism per se. Instead, European publics are increasingly challenged to judge whether ordinary representative politics needs to be democratically disrupted, or whether we are indeed witnessing a disruption of representative democratic politics in Europe. This perspective translates the theoretical observation that populism has both democratic and undemocratic tendencies (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Moffitt, 2016) into a call for action: namely, not to be 'for' or 'against' democracy or populism, but to assess the extent to which democratic practices in Europe require modification and are threatened by undemocratic forces. Building on this discussion, the conclusion in part four looks at the implications of this dynamic for how we may deal with the politics of the extraordinary in Europe, both in everyday political encounters and in the long term.

2. Approaching Populism

2.1 Populism as a political strategy

The conceptual debate about populism concerns its very categorisation as a political phenomenon. Much of the literature distinguishes between populism as a political logic, ideology, strategy, discourse, and/or style—with the similarities and differences between them being more or less pronounced, depending on the author (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013; Moffitt, 2016). These different approaches share the view that populism is about a (moral) antagonism between ‘the elites’ and ‘the people’. However, they focus on different aspects concerning its emergence, empirical manifestation, and goals in varying contexts, and hence draw different conclusions about the phenomenon.

The categorisation of populism as logic posits that the elite–people antagonism is the result of attempts to re-politicise and radicalise a democratic system that has become unresponsive to multiple popular demands, and hence unsustainable. It offers an alternative political choice, one that proposes the establishment of a new order to replace existing (unresponsive) institutions. In this sense, so the argument goes, populism is the logic of the political itself (Laclau, 2005). Many scholars, however, have dismissed this conceptualisation for two main reasons: it does not leave room for non-populist constructions of the political, and it assumes a priori that the moralistic politics of populism have a positive effect on democratic systems (Arditi, 2010, pp. 491–493; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018, p. 1682).

As regards the other four categories, Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (2017) have recently suggested a distinction between three approaches to conceptualising populism: ideational, political-strategic, and socio-cultural—with the latter two corresponding to populism as a strategy and as a discourse/style, respectively. The ideational approach, coined almost 15 years ago, continues to be very popular, but comes with its own set of issues. Among its major advantages is its comparability across temporal and geographic contexts based on the analysis of ideas as reflected in manifestos, electoral programmes, speeches, and the like (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). While conceiving of populism as a (very) ‘thin-centred’ ideology rooted solely in the belief of an elite–people antagonism enables us to think of it as something that can be combined with different ‘thick’ ideologies such as socialism or nationalism (Mudde, 2004), it also makes it difficult to distinguish between these two dimensions. Consequently, phenomena arising from nationalism, socialism, etc. are often falsely attributed to populism (De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017; De Cleen, Glynos, and Mondon, 2018, p. 653).

The strategic approach, by contrast, emphasises that populism cannot be reduced to the ‘people vs. elite’ opposition, but is a multidimensional phenomenon that is activated if and when external circumstances make its success more likely—circumstances that populist actors, in turn, seek to preserve. As such, populism is essentially independent of any (‘thick’) ideological attachment, but combines a direct and supposedly unmediated (instead of institutionalised) organisation and

communication style with enemy-focused programmatic elements (e.g. protection of ‘the people’ through borders or redistribution policies) to mobilise ‘the people’ as a highly diverse mass of followers (Weyland, 2017). The key criticism levelled against this approach is that it is too closely tied to the political leader (and a ‘charismatic’ one at that), a top-down party organisation structure, and mass events (e.g. online petitions, rallies, and protests). While its advocates take these features as an explanation for populists’ opportunism and volatility, others point out that they do not apply to all actors who may otherwise be considered to be populist—especially outside the Latin American context where populist leaders like Hugo Chávez in Venezuela or Rafael Correa in Ecuador did indeed adopt highly personalised leadership styles. The strategic approach would thus lack comparative-analytical value (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018, p. 1672).

However, populists’ strategic-ness does not exhaust itself in a political leader’s relationship to his or her followers, party and/or movement—although this relationship may fill the gap left by populism’s ‘thin’ ideological basis (Taggart, 2000, p. 101). Instead, as I will show in this paper, populism is also strategic in that it balances sameness and difference, closeness and distance, and change and stability to form an integrated and organic relationship to the representative democratic system as a whole.

Whether conceptualised as an ideology or as a strategy, the socio-cultural context in which populist actors express their particular view of the ‘political’ linguistically and aesthetically is key to making it resonate with different audiences. Scholars who engage with populism as discourse look primarily at how the distinction between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ is realised through spoken and written language. That is, they are interested in how—as imaginary political subjects—both are rendered present through (verbal) performance (e.g. by using particular registers such as slang), and embedded in and amplified by the mediated political environment (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014, pp. 387-388; Moffitt, 2016, p. 88). Advocates of the style concept add visual and aesthetic elements of expression to this analysis (e.g. clothing, gestures), which help to emphasise populism’s emotional appeal, especially in the context of an increasingly mediated political landscape (Moffitt, 2016, p. 22, p. 27; see also Diehl, 2017; Brubaker, 2017).

Advocates of both the discursive and stylistic approach see populism as a question of degree across time and the political spectrum, rather than as something that is simply present or absent (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; Diehl, 2011). While any political actor may therefore employ populist elements in his or her communication, the ‘populism’ label tends to be applied to those whose language and aesthetics feature populist elements to a particularly high degree, especially when combined with programmatic and organisational aspects of populism (Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011).

The different approaches to conceptualising populism are thus not mutually exclusive. Building on this insight, this paper understands populism as a strategy for gaining and maintaining political influence by offering a carefully balanced programmatic, discursive, and aesthetic performance that

upholds these actors' position as simultaneously 'within' and 'outside' the representative-democratic system. This performance seeks to be 'extraordinary' vis-à-vis that which populist actors present as ordinary and (hence) less than democratic or even antidemocratic political practices.

2.2 Populism and representative democracy

There is broad agreement in the literature that populism is both a feature of and (potentially) hostile to representative politics, making it both a corrective of and a threat to the latter (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). The existence of the “tenacity of and tensions within European democratic practices, ideas and institutions” makes populism as a political force possible in the first place (rather than 'just' a cultural feature of politics) (Taggart, 2004, p. 269, p. 273; see also Canovan, 1999). This is because the pursuit of consensus in European democracies and the concomitant clustering of 'mainstream' parties and professionalisation of party politics often lead to a decline in accountability, transparency, and representativeness (especially in federal systems), thereby providing the ground for anti-elite appeals (Hakhverdian and Koop, 2007).

It is important, however, to distinguish between representative-democratic politics as an idea and as a practice (Linde and Ekman, 2003). There is little evidence that support for the principle of democratic representation itself is declining. However, there appears to be widespread dissatisfaction with how political leaders present themselves, the decisions they make, and how these decisions are communicated to the public. All of this gives way to fears of undemocratic 'extreme elitism' (Dahl, 2000; Taggart, 2004, p. 283; Foa and Mounk, 2017; Schoor, 2017, p. 666). This is indicated, for instance, by the decline in party membership over time or the growing number of large-scale protests worldwide (van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke, 2012; Youngs, 2017).

The extraordinary populist politics of representation need to be considered vis-à-vis 'ordinary' democratic-representative politics.

While populism is thus often linked to the promotion of direct democracy (Haskell, 2000; Pew Global, 2017), the populist construction of opposition between 'the elites' and 'the people' does not aim to break up the representative link between these (supposedly homogeneous) groups, but to present populist actors as the only ones capable of fixing it by re-including those who are, or at least feel, excluded. The discrepancy that populists identify is that between (others') elite practices and popular sovereignty that ought to be addressed by providing better government—a gap that they claim to fill (Canovan, 1999, p. 7). This may or may not involve tools of 'direct' politics (Taggart, 2004, p. 273), but necessarily implies a different approach to 'representation'. Needless to say, the line between populist critiques of representative politics as a practice and as an ideal is easily blurred, and the fluid transition from one to the other is part and parcel of the potential “authoritarian outcomes of populist promises of democratization” (de la Torre, 2016, p. 135).

The above implies that populism may indeed be considered ‘thin’ to the extent that it depends on the elite practices that it seeks to challenge. More specifically, it requires the latter to be in a weakened position in order to emerge as a distinct political force. This makes populism itself inherently weak (Taggart, 2004, p. 275, p. 278). In his critique of Laclau’s conception of populism as the logic of the political, Arditì (2010) also points to this feature of contemporary populism when he says that its dependence on the delegitimisation of existing elites (as Laclau suggests) means that it cannot be a constitutive force, but only a derivative one—and hence a non-revolutionary one (p. 494). The initial struggle of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) to change its strategic outlook after Angela Merkel announced in October 2018 that she would step down as CDU leader almost immediately (a new one was elected in December) and as Chancellor in 2021 illustrates this dependency.

The extraordinary populist politics of representation, therefore, need to be considered vis-à-vis ‘ordinary’ democratic-representative politics. This forms the key assumption underlying the discussion in section 3, which explores how the populist strategy of providing ‘better government’ translates into the everyday politics of the extraordinary.

3. The populist politics of the extraordinary

Bearing in mind the considerations above, this section reconsiders the relationship between populism and representative democracy by developing the notion of a strategic politics of the extraordinary. It does so by exploring the three interrelated dimensions introduced in section 1:

- populists as ‘extraordinary strangers’ in the representative-democratic system;
- populists’ ‘extraordinary’ mode of representation based on the construction of interlocked relations of closeness to and distance from ‘the people’; and
- populist responses to and constructions of ‘times of extraordinary change’ vis-à-vis the representative-democratic order.

3.1 Populists as ‘strangers’ in the representative-democratic system

While contemporary research on populism is still predominantly anchored in political theory and political science, some authors draw on classic sociological work to help carve out the contours of the phenomenon. One of the key works that has appeared in this context but has received limited attention is Simmel’s (1971 [1908]) concept of the ‘stranger’. It introduces a type of social actor who is at a spatial and temporal distance from a bounded group (such as a political community), at once ‘outside’ it and confronting it. S/he is close and yet remote, attached and detached at the same time. Simmel himself gives the example of the travelling trader for this form of social interaction. Scholars of populism mostly speak of it in relation to migrants who, as ‘strangers’ and ‘outsiders’, are portrayed as a threat by right-wing populists because they embody geopolitical, economic, and cultural globalisation anxieties (Gandehsa, 2003; see also Wodak, 2015, p. 86, p. 153; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018, p. 1677).

However, populists themselves may also be considered ‘extraordinary strangers’ in a Simmelian sense, namely vis-à-vis the representative-democratic system. While they emerge from within that system, as discussed in section two, populists and non-populists have “only the absolutely general in common” (Simmel, 1971 [1908], p. 148), namely a broad appeal to popular sovereignty. Populists are comparable to other democratic political actors in that they lay emphasis on the relationship between elected representatives and the ‘people’ as the sovereign, i.e. the source from which power ultimately emanates by giving authority to elected rulers. More importantly, they claim that existing representatives have abused this authority by making bad judgments about how to interpret their voters’ preferences (Plotke, 1997, p. 29). This critique in and of itself resembles mere anti-incumbent politics. It is a critique of current elite practices and as such not at odds with but in support of the principles of representative democracy.

However, in practice this is not all there is to populist politics. Populists may be emphasising the importance of popular sovereignty, but they are also different from ‘ordinary’ representative politics in important ways, which are closely tied to the notion of ‘the people’. Most important, as the literature on populism emphasises, making the ‘people’ as an imaginary, non-falsifiable political subject—whether defined as the ‘nation’, the ‘underdog’ or the ‘plebs’ (e.g., Panizza, 2005)—a key element of the relationship between ‘rulers’ and the ‘ruled’ excludes individuals and social groups who are seen as standing outside the people’s ‘one homogeneous will’. That is, while populist actors claim to include previously excluded members of the polity (albeit with mixed success, see Leininger and Meijers, 2017; Immerzeel and Pickup, 2015), it denies representation to other sections. An actual improvement of democratic governance, however, would “expand the number of voices in conversations about what to do” (Plotke, 1997, p. 24), based on a pluralist construction of ‘the people’ that acknowledges its temporariness and fallibility (de la Torre, 2016, p. 127-129). This is the difference between ‘the people’ (which does not imply a dominance of the majority over minorities in a liberal democracy, cf. Albertazzi and Mueller, 2013, p. 347) and ‘*the* people’, which populist actors seek to conceal by intentionally blurring the boundaries between ‘the people’, ‘voters’, and ‘constituents’.

Populism diverges from representative democracy by seeking to fill the latter’s empty place of power with the “people-as-one”, thereby disregarding the socio-political diversity acknowledged by the democratic order

The notion of ‘the people’ also denies the responsibility of the represented in shaping their own relationship to their representatives (in particular through the act of voting) and the constraints of representatives’ power in a democratic system. Populist actors also regularly attribute other representatives’ allegedly irresponsible behaviour and their inability to faithfully represent ‘the people’s will’ to their elite status itself—rather than a dysfunctional dialogue between representatives and their constituents, for example (Plotke, 1997, pp. 30-31).

Populist politics thus denies the legitimate competition between different representatives and the preferences they stand for (as well as their own aims) by claiming “we, and only we, are the people” (Müller, 2016, p. 98). While this may be a “justified revolutionary claim” in non-democratic regimes (ibid., p. 73), in representative democracies it feeds the myth that all other political competitors are uninterested in, or even work intentionally against, ‘the people’s’ interests (Richards, 2018, p. 129; Brubaker, 2017, p. 363).

Binding a single political subject to one particular elite and only to them is also at odds with the democratic principle that politicians are “elected in a succession of temporarily elected officials” and that they can be voted out of office if the relationship between representative and the represented changes (de la Torre, 2016, p. 135). In short, populism diverges from representative democracy by seeking to fill the latter’s empty place of power with the “people-as-one”, thereby disregarding the socio-political diversity acknowledged by the democratic order (Abts and Rummens, 2007, p. 414; Moffitt, 2016, p. 64).

Populists’ positioning within the democratic system as ‘extraordinary’ representatives is tied to the idea that they possess an extraordinary set of skills.

In light of the above, the emphasis should be on populists’ “special proportion and reciprocal tension” (Simmel, 1971 [1908], p. 149) vis-à-vis the representative-democratic system that constitutes their position as both strangers and organic members of the latter. More specifically, we should look more closely at how they maintain the balance between sameness (regarding popular sovereignty and a nominal support for representation) and difference (concerning the political subject exercising popular sovereignty and the disregard for institutions and practices standing in its way) that populists cultivate. They do this in order to present themselves—and be accepted by others—as ‘good democrats’ by “accentuat[ing] certain matters and conceal[ing] others” (Goffman, 1990 [1956], p. 74; see also Wodak, 2009; Fitzgerald, 2015; Schoor, 2017, p. 662). Paying more attention to how this is done in concrete situations may also provide us with further insight into the relationship between democratic and anti-democratic tendencies within populism (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Moffitt, 2016, p. 142 et seqq.).

3.2 Populists as extraordinary re-presentatives vis-à-vis ‘the people’

Populists’ posing as strangers also produces a balance between closeness to and distance from ‘the people’: they present themselves as less ‘prejudiced’ and more ‘objective’ (Simmel, 1971 [1908], p. 146) than their political competitors due to their alleged lack of ties to the (rest of the) existing political class—and hence as (better) capable of re-presenting ‘the people’. Their positioning within the democratic system as ‘extraordinary’ representatives is thus tied to the idea that they possess an extraordinary set of skills.

This connects to another core sociological concept present within the contemporary literature on populism: the Weberian category of ‘charismatic leadership’. According to Weber, this form of authority is specific to a leader who possesses—or, more precisely, who is (mis)perceived as possessing—‘magical’ capabilities that provide the ground for a particularly close bond between the leader and his or her followers (Weber, 1956 [1922]; see also Adair-Totef, 2005; Joosse, 2014). Political charisma as a (legitimate) strategy for gaining political authority within an ‘ordinary’ democratic political system, therefore, is extraordinary because it is built on closeness to one’s followers as well as on distance from them (Pappas, 2011, p. 2). This balancing of closeness and distance seeks to give legitimacy to populists’ claim to being better representatives than all other political competitors.

What exactly this ‘extraordinariness’ is and how it manifests itself in relation to populism, however, is still a subject of debate. Despite the fact that notions of ‘distance from’ and ‘closeness to’ one’s followers are both present in Weber’s concept, most students of populism have argued that populist and charismatic leadership are essentially different. While the former would emphasise the ‘common men’ image of the leader, the latter would seek to create a ‘super(wo)man’ image. The two may also coincide, with ‘charismatic populists’ combining ‘common man’ and ‘super(wo)man’ images (Eatwell, 2002, p. 17; Taggart, 2004; Weyland, 2017). Charisma would facilitate populism as a means of being ‘close to the people’ by “instill[ing] confidence in the leader’s capacity to perform”, generating popular support and promoting mobilisation. However, it is not commonly seen as a core characteristic of populism (Mudde, 2004, p. 545; Barr 2009, p. 41).

This view of what charisma does for populists, however, is rooted in an interpretation of charisma as a psychological or sociological phenomenon, rather than a political one, that may indeed be linked to ‘extraordinariness’ more broadly, comprising not only particular personal attributes but also strategic choices, organised entities, and electoral contests (Pappas, 2011, p. 3).

In a recent attempt to move away from the socio-psychological approach (while remaining focused on individual leaders), Moffitt (2016) has argued that instead of looking for populists’ ‘special’ leadership skills, we should focus on the performance of ‘bad manners’, i.e. the deliberate violation of rules of appropriateness in a given political context, as an operationalisable dimension of populist appeals. He sees this as a tool for populists to perform their own ordinariness vis-à-vis ‘regular people’ in order to set themselves apart from other politicians and thereby promote their “‘outsider’ credentials” (Moffitt, 2016, p. 58). As ‘outsiders’, then, populists are different from other political actors merely because they pretend to be ‘ordinary’ (and hence different from ‘ordinary’ politics). They may, for example, flaunt a habit of drinking and smoking in public like former UKIP leader Nigel Farage, or draw attention to their own vulnerability as Austrian FPÖ presidential candidate Norbert Hofer did with reference to the visible injuries he had suffered from a 2003 leisure accident (Block and Negrine, 2017, p. 185; Richards 2018, p. 20). Extraordinariness vis-à-vis ‘the people’ is the other side of this ‘ordinariness-through-likeness’ coin, which, for Moffitt, predominantly resides in their self-presentation as celebrity-like figures with alleged superhuman (bodily) strengths (Moffitt, 2016, pp. 63-68).

Being close to ‘the people’, however, does not merely mean that populist actors are like them; they also need to make a believable claim to know them and their concerns (better)—rather than listening to them to discern their demands and interests (see Mudde, 2004, p. 558). Part of the populist politics of the extraordinary is thus the merging of identities, for example by emphasising familiarity with the everyday life worlds of the (ordinary) ‘people’ and their connections to the past. This may be connected to different kinds of populism: on the far left, a ‘socialist’ past with less consumerism and more welfare may be contrasted with a present dominated by rapid technological change and austerity. On the far right, a homogeneous, trustworthy, and familiar environment is often juxtaposed with a new and threatening surrounding shaped by greater ethnic and religious diversity and pluralism of life choices (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018, p. 1676). Ylä-Anttila gives the example of a classic Finnish summer hymn, which the right-wing Finns Party (whose Finnish name, *Perussuomalaiset*, translates as both ‘Ordinary Finns’ and ‘True Finns’) used in the 2000s to mediate between themselves and ‘the people’. By appealing to and valorising a shared experience tied to particular events, places, and seasons, an idea of ‘the (national) people’ could be constructed (2017, p. 346, p. 351).

Successfully establishing this identitarian link can subsequently serve populists’ anti-elite appeals and self-image as the better, or in fact only, representatives. The German AfD, for instance, regularly claims that German citizens are being subjected to “supervised thinking” in the public media whenever journalists, scholars, or politicians offer accounts of events and opinions that the party disagrees with, especially when they amount to criticism of the AfD itself.¹ Such propositions can only be reconciled with the party’s own version of ‘supervised thinking’—their claim to be speaking for ‘the people’—if they can make believe that they identify with the latter and therefore do not force views on them.

This combination of ‘knowing’ and ‘being (like)’ ‘the people’ thus implies a claim to being authentic, that is, to re-present their will faithfully so it does not deviate in any way from the original. However, this ‘authentic’ link between the represented and their representatives—captured most clearly in the rhetoric of ‘giving power back to the people’—no longer amounts to representation at all. Instead, it undermines the vertical relationship between them by replacing the re-presentation of interests with an identitarian link (Mény, 2003, p. 263; Diehl, 2011, pp. 285-286; Weyland, 2017, p. 59). But ‘nonidentity’, i.e. the idea that the identities of the represented and their representatives do not merge, is “a very important dimension of any democratic notion of representation”, because without it the represented are no longer autonomous, but in a dependent relationship to their representatives (Plotke, 1997, p. 28, p. 31).

The balance between closeness to and distance from ‘the people’ thus allows populists to make a claim to being the better representatives, even if they do not actually employ any more innovative means than their competitors to assess what (a majority of) citizens think. In other words, populists can purport to be stabilising the representative link without necessarily making any perceptible

¹ See for example the AfD’s October 2017 post entitled “[Assisted thinking for stupid citizens: unmasking a profession](#)” (link in German).

changes to improve democratic practices. This strategy speaks to many citizens who are interested in having a democratic government that is responsive to their demands without requiring active political participation (Dahl, 2000; Mudde, 2004).

3.3 Populists and extraordinary circumstances: radical change and stability

If charisma, as Pappas argues, relates to ‘extraordinary’ politics in general rather than leaders’ personal attributes, its success “presupposes a fair amount of creative politics aiming at genuine institutional alteration and, inevitably, radical political change” (2011, p. 3). More precisely, it is about “the legal, normally non-violent, subversion of an established institutional framework in order to replace it with a new—allegedly better—one” (ibid., p. 5), and hence about something extraordinary in an ordinary political system characterised by incremental, technocratic change. As ‘strangers’, populist actors, too, claim to take a fresh perspective on the symbolic and normative foundations of an existing order to establish new ones.

This resonates with both the notion of external political and economic instability as a facilitator of the populist politics of the extraordinary (Laclau, 2005; Taggart, 2004), and the performance of crisis as an endogenous element of populism (Moffitt, 2016). On the one hand, “populism is not the politics of the stable, ordered polity but comes as an accompaniment to change, crisis and challenge” (Taggart, 2004, p. 275).

Indeed, as Brubaker notes, the socio-economic, cultural, and political transformation processes of the past couple of decades “have created opportunities and incentives for almost all political actors to draw in some contexts on some elements of the populist repertoire” (2017, p. 373).

However, on the other hand, populism as a distinct political force is dependent on citizens’ perception of a discrepancy between the ideals of a representative democratic system and representative political practices. The leader of Podemos, Pablo Iglesias, for example, says that his party is “the result of the disaster of these policies of austerity in Spain” and an “opportunity of change”, because austerity meant “the end of democracy” (Democracy Now!, 2015). In fact, a book published by Iglesias, a former university lecturer, carries the title “Politics in a Time of Crisis: Podemos and the Future of Democracy in Europe”.

Populist actors emphasise this unwanted change in order to legitimise their own preference for rapid, radical and immediate change as a defensive measure that promises a return to stability. With reference to people’s ‘longing for the past’, as discussed above, they claim to fix the (extraneous) crisis “by returning to times before it happened, before habits had to be justified, when one could navigate worldly complexities based on familiarity”. This replaces the ‘ordinary’ recourse to common frames of justification for action in a crisis (Ylä-Anttila, 2017, p. 352).

Populists are keen to actively translate any existing discrepancies between democratic ideals and democratic practices into a sense of crisis to maintain their success.

Unsurprisingly, populists are therefore keen to actively translate any existing discrepancies between democratic ideals and democratic practices into a sense of crisis to maintain their success. Moffitt (2016) has recently developed this dimension further, building on earlier insights into the need for active mobilisation to render ‘the people’ present through “inject[ing] an urgency and an importance to their message” (Mudde, 2004, p. 548; Taggart, 2004, p. 275). He argues that the populist performance of crisis elevates the (systemic) failure of others in order to propose a return to ‘stability’ and ‘normalcy’ through immediate correction (Moffitt, 2016, p. 114, p. 120). This performance is dynamic in that it perpetually links one failure to another and switches from one crisis notion to another as necessary and appropriate (ibid., p. 122, p. 129), e.g. from socio-economic inequality to immigration. In doing so, it moves “crisis from being an extraordinary phenomenon to an ordinary one” (ibid., p. 130). This is part of the ‘creativity’ that underlies extraordinary politics in an ordinary political system.

3.4 A robust strategy

It becomes clear, then, that the success of the populist politics of the extraordinary relies on the mutual dependency of its three core dimensions. To be accepted as the only ones who can respond

Although populist parties and movements may often be treated as ‘outsiders’ of ordinary democratic politics, they are, in fact, anything but.

to a crisis most effectively—concerning growing divergences between democratic ideals and practices as well as the threat of unwanted rapid change—these actors need to establish a close identitarian link to their followers. They also must present themselves as ‘the only true democrats’ who want to return sovereignty to the ‘people’, even if this ‘people’ is in fact an exclusionary one and its ‘will’ is steered from above.

This may also imply the simultaneous embodiment and denial of change on the level of policymaking. For example, the implementation of policies by experts, as advocated by former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi and the late Dutch right-wing politician Pim Fortuyn, among others (Mudde, 2004, p. 547), does not necessarily contradict these populists’ claim that they implement the ‘will of the people’ and fight against (other) elites’ technocratic politics. If they can make believe that they are ‘one with the people’ and, when in government, deliver policy outcomes that the latter find desirable (Singer, 2018), the re-delegation of their own governing powers to the experts and technocrats whom they criticise as disrupting the link between representatives and ‘the people’ can still be presented as happening in the people’s name. In this way, they can uphold their promise of an ideal (or at least better) democratic government without abandoning the “alienating institutions and professional expertise” that make it function. In this sense, the populist politics of the extraordinary appear to offer a recipe for reconciling the tension between democracy’s pragmatic and redemptive face (Canovan, 1999, p. 14).

Populist actors may thus follow the exact same practices as ‘ordinary’ democratic politicians (such as the outsourcing of policy implementation to ‘experts’), while nevertheless claiming to provide better representation. Their rhetorical and aesthetic dissociation from ‘ordinary’ technocratic politics (Moffitt, 2016, p. 58) is then only part of a bigger strategy of remaining ‘extraordinary’ vis-à-vis their competitors. This may also explain why even established and governing populists may not lose their appeal, at least in the medium-term, despite their pursuit of illiberal principles (Albertazzi and Mueller, 2013).

On the one hand, populism may thus be perceived as an extraordinary moment of change and renewal itself (de la Torre, 2016, p. 134), where ‘extraordinary’ politicians present themselves during ‘extraordinary’ times, based on a creative politics that links real socio-economic change to the performance of crisis. On the other hand, however, they also need to keep a balance between this overt emphasis on extraordinariness as both an exogenous and an endogenous feature and the return of ordinariness, stability, and normalcy.

This suggests that in order for populist politics to be successful, the anti-elite performance of ‘true’ democratic sovereignty, ‘real’ representation, and the need for ‘active’ crisis management needs to be upheld infinitely. Its individual elements constantly reconfirm each other to create a robust strategy that is, beyond a certain threshold, difficult to break up from the outside.

4. Conclusion: The politics of the extraordinary and representative democracy

Fifteen years ago, Taggart observed that “European populism has, whatever its short-term spectacular nature, a limited potential” (2004, p. 285). Today, European populists’ spectacular nature has become normalised, transforming their chameleon-like nature into an opportunity rather than a hindrance and facilitating their emergence as a serious political force.

4.1 Populism as long-term strategy

This paper has outlined an approach to this spectacular nature of populism that views it as a carefully constructed strategic performance of ‘extraordinariness’, oscillating between sameness and difference, closeness and distance, and radical change and stability vis-à-vis the representative-democratic order. It thereby fills with life the ideological definition of populism as the pitting of ‘the elites’ and ‘the people’ against each other. This elaboration may help to better account for populism’s ability to adapt to different contexts, its presence across the ideological spectrum, and its durability. It also raises questions about whether a neat demarcation between populism and representative liberal democracy on the one hand and between populism and extremism on the other hand is useful, when the very *goal* of populist politics is to remain ‘in between’, simultaneously doing and undoing representative democracy.

Although populist parties and movements—especially those that have appeared on the political scene only recently—may often be treated as ‘outsiders’ of ordinary democratic politics, they are, in fact, anything but. This is in part because the emergence of populism is facilitated by citizens’ dissatisfaction with the procedures and outputs of democratic politics. It is also because these actors position themselves strategically as being both inside and outside the democratic-representative order. Their picking and choosing elements of (liberal) democracy that fit their interests at any given time (Moffitt, 2016, p. 150; Moffitt, 2017) is but one key element of this complex strategy. Populism, like liberal-representative democracy, is not ‘simple’ (Dahrendorf, 2003; see also Canovan, 1999, pp. 5-6) —it merely projects simplicity.

Approaching populist politics as the result of such ‘strategic extraordinariness’ supports the increasingly popular view that studying (the supply side of) populism(s) empirically requires an integrative methodology that combines different elements—organisational, programmatic, discursive, and stylistic. The discussion above has only touched on how populism’s strategic extraordinariness may manifest itself in concrete instances, and how its elements may combine, both spatially and over time, to create an integrative strategy. Further empirical study will help to explore this question, including how and to what extent left- and right-wing political parties (and their respective leaders) commonly defined as ‘populist’ draw on this strategy.

4.2 Responding to the populist politics of the extraordinary

What does the approach presented here imply for how we should respond to populist politics? Most important, it fosters the view that there is no clear antagonism between ‘representative democracy’ and ‘populism’. Therefore, the latter does not need to be combatted, as many political actors continue to advocate (often because their focus is on political ideology, not populism). What we are currently witnessing is not that much of a battle between ‘representative democracy’ and ‘populism’. It is a performance that leaves publics to decide whether ordinary representative politics needs to be democratically disrupted (as populist actors claim), or whether we are witnessing a (populist) disruption of representative democratic politics—and what quality this disruption has or should have.

In answering these questions, this paper suggests to take into consideration that everyday populist performances, while they may not amount to a full-fledged ideology, resemble a carefully balanced, fully formed strategy. This entails that we should not focus on individual empirical manifestations of this strategy such as conspiracy theories, perpetrator-victim reversals, and the provocation of scandal, which much of the academic and policy literatures have focused on to date (e.g., Wodak, 2015). Instead, we should aim to disrupt (rather than to combat) the strategy as a whole. This needs to be done while bearing in mind that this strategy is highly context-specific and dynamic. Grand counter-strategies for how to respond to populism in Europe in the long term (e.g. through the promotion of equality and improvement of social security levels) are therefore unlikely to be sufficient.

At the same time, everyday disruption is time-sensitive, given that the strategic elements of populist politics stabilise each other the more they are invoked—including across national borders. In other words, precisely because populism is here to stay, and because it poses a long-term challenge for Europe and EU integration because of what it may become, responding to it effectively requires both a holistic, long-term perspective and attention to the details of everyday political interaction.

Any counter-strategy of disruption also needs to acknowledge that European populisms play with the fact that democracy has successfully established itself as the unquestioned political ideal—it is “crowned with a halo of sacred authority”, as Canovan puts it (1999, p. 11). Unsurprisingly, then, we all are democrats now; or at least we claim to be (Brown, 2010). This makes it more difficult to differentiate clearly and credibly between those actors who do pursue democracy as an “appealing illusion”, and those for whom it is “little more than a tolerable abomination” (Wallach, 2010). In Europe’s representative democracies, the populist politics of the extraordinary has already become part of the political itself, and hence of the production of fluid, politicised, and contested democratic identities (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014, p. 393).

If, as de la Torre writes, the “populist imaginary lies between democracy and totalitarianism”, what we need is a more ‘extraordinary’ representative democracy that promotes “the emancipatory promises of constituent power without disregarding all the institutions and norms of constituted power in a representative democracy” (2016, p. 133). That is, what is required is neither a battle against nor a total disruption of populism, but a “self-limiting revolution” that improves representation and hence inclusion (*ibid.*, p. 135; Plotke, 1997). The approach outlined above may open up another perspective on how this can be done.

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