

CHAPTER 13



Overview and Background Democracy and Populism: The European Case

Douglas R. Holmes*

Department of Anthropology, Binghamton University, New York, United States

Abstract

This chapter examines the evolution of contemporary European populism from a collection of fringe insurgencies into a deeply embedded, institution-shaping force within the European Parliament and the broader European project. Drawing on three decades of ethnographic and institutional observation, it demonstrates how populist actors have mastered the procedural, rhetorical, and technocratic mechanisms of the European Union (EU), transforming them into instruments for advancing illiberal civilizational agendas centred on identity, personhood and sovereignty. Far from operating at the margins, these movements now occupy the political centre, generating viral configurations of thought and affect that shape public discourse and institutional practice across Europe. Their 'gain of function' has been amplified by transnational linkages – including increasing convergence with US populist strategies – and by exogenous cultural forces that escape standard policy analysis. The chapter argues that these dynamics pose a profound challenge to liberal democracy, requiring new analytical tools commensurate with the scale and complexity of the phenomenon.

Keywords: European populism; illiberalism; European Parliament; identity and sovereignty; populist insurgency; transatlantic politics

* dholmes@binghamton.edu

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Introduction

Policymakers, scholars, and analysts have long presented populism as anti-institutional, or outside mainstream sites of governance and policymaking. But what the new research shows is that this is a new (and thus more dangerous) moment in populist political evolution: Rather than working from the outside in, populist leaders have effectively organized and governed from the very centre of our rule of law and democratic institutions. Whatever the outcome of any future election, the structures of feeling, the configuration of ideas which animate populism are now commonplace. Their anticipatory nature and expectational dynamics confront us daily. Populism is no longer the agenda of unruly individuals and loathsome factions; we all occupy a political field increasingly defined by the exigencies of contemporary populism (Miller-Idriss 2018; Zerofsky 2024). And this fact, even from the perspective of a few years ago, would have been unthinkable.

Populist movements – bracketed typically as extreme- or far right with national, subnational and regional variants – have defined an increasingly expansive, illiberal politics of Europe and as such challenge the sanctity of democratic norms and values as well as the primacy of the rule of law. For more than three decades a decisive confrontation has unfolded within an institution of the European Union, the European Parliament, revealing the dynamic interplay between populist insurgencies and democratic institutional norms and conventions (see Tonne forthcoming). European integration provided a template for a populist insurgency within which the continuous generation of tactical positions was accomplished. Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) representing these groups mastered the institutional procedures of the EU, allowing them to insinuate their disruptive, occasionally ludicrous, positions into parliamentary discourse and debate. They were alert to every policy indiscretion and every organizational failure – notably regarding the Euro and immigration crises – which they exploited with devastating effect. On a more fundamental level, the MEPs orchestrating this insurgency developed a series of pivotal civilizational priorities – spanning language, religion, race and gender – which they sought to endow with political legitimacy and currency. Rather than abstract economic or technocratic interests, these MEPs have sought to shape a discourse on Europe in which the nature and dynamics of sovereignty are aligned with the sublime aspiration of identity and personhood.

This brief text thus seeks to provide a primer of sorts for understanding the

formidable historical and philosophical exigencies by which illiberal agendas are assuming a fully democratic guise, creating a vast field of political thought and action increasingly populated by young activists and their supporters. The European elections of 2024 and the subsequent election of Donald Trump as US president marked a decisive moment in this political history. A series of micro-insurgencies, which I have studied for more than three decades, underwent a ‘gain of function’, a term I have adapted and modified from virology. By that I mean, certain struggles – in many respects benign and prosaic struggles – can yield new and highly virulent and transmissible configurations of thought and action. Newly elected MEPs representing Patriots for Europe (PfE) and European Conservative and Reformist (ECR) are orchestrating this transformation, this gain of function. They no longer seek to disrupt, curtail or reverse the European project; they aspire to fully conquer it from within, achieving a new, totalizing politics.

How the European case discussed herein can inform a comparative analysis of US politics is very much an open question. There is, no doubt, a systematic and intensifying transatlantic sharing of tactics and strategies underway at many levels of politics and policy. Most obviously, tariffs proposed by the Trump administration are calibrated simultaneously as instruments of domestic US policy and as vehicles for transforming the entire global economic and political order. They ramify through populist politics on both sides of the Atlantic, hinting at a new global framework provisionally articulated in the Mar-a-Lago accord (Mar-a-Lago Accord, n.d.). Relatedly, institutional and regulatory capture in the United States and the EU are also striking tactical aspects of the populist insurgency, anchoring these insurgencies in the rent-seeking schemes of firms and corporations, as well as in the policy orientations of diverse (typically illiberal) special interest groups.

Far less accessible to standard policy analyses are exogenous forces animating contemporary populism: creative outlooks, sensibilities and practices that continually disrupt and recast conventional democratic norms and conventions. What follows is an investigation of these exigencies from the European side of the Atlantic. The degree to which they align with the other side constitutes the decisive question of our time. Indeed, the European case poses decisive questions regarding the nature and function of policy itself and its relations to the interests and outlooks of the public at large.

When I began in the late 1980s observing and analysing the form and content of emerging populist political formations, I was struck by their emphatically future-



oriented agendas, predicated on ‘Europe’ as the political field, and European integration as the domain of dissonant thought and action. At the time, European integration was barely imaginable, and yet, I encountered activists plotting a low-key insurgency within this supranational project, a project which, for many Europeans, was at the time little more than an ill-defined dream or fantasy. During that period, I had conversations with eight founders and or leaders of these diverse populist groups (Holmes 2000). Over the ensuing three decades, these MEPs and their successors defined an increasingly expansive illiberal politics of Europe. European integration provided the template against which the continuous generation of positions was accomplished. The European Parliament’s institutional practices and democratic norms were mastered, allowing these MEPs to insinuate their disruptive positions into parliamentary discourse and debate. They learned the intricacies of the EU institutionally and sought to employ this knowledge opportunistically, as an increasingly defiant oppositional stance, which they were prepared to exploit and pillage.

Rather than treating populism merely as a species of politics, I have sought to investigate it as a much broader systemic phenomenon: a configuration of ideas that are continually generated, circulated, and contested, capable of colonising feelings, thoughts, intimacies, devotions, moods, and actions. Populist ideas shape perceptions of what is just or unjust, what is real or unreal, and, ultimately, what it means to be human. Populism thus emerges as an intricate communicative field spanning Europe, an entangled web of meaning that constitutes a dissonant realm we all inhabit. The challenge we face is how to engage the forces animating populist politics, particularly those rooted in powerful attachments to identity, belonging and personhood, forces which resist simple analytical abstraction and quantitative analysis (Shoshan 2022; Szombat 2021).

Populism observed

Populist activists have cultivated a public, spanning left and right across Europe, eager for a message of withering discontent with the technocratic regime in Brussels. They proposed alternative science, political economy, and metaphysics of solidarity in which the dynamics of sovereignty are anchored to the sublime aspiration of identity and personhood. The policies governing immigration, the fate of refugees, various domains of cultural identity, as well as law and order, have become prominent as the issues the extreme right owns, no longer as a disruptive or marginal preoccupation, but as defining issues of and for Europe, issues which

moved to the centre of fraught political contestation in the twenty-first century.

So, what is the nature or substance of this politics? How has a compendium of discontents, which have animated these insurgent groups for decades, been recast as a self-confident program aimed at recrafting virtually every institutional agenda of the EU from within? What follows are thirteen insights – affordances – designed to orient meaningful and sustained political engagement with a European-wide populist insurgency.

1. Populism is alive, relentlessly and emphatically defining and redefining itself. And this fluidity, this fugitive character, this profoundly systemic and ambient nature creates confounding problems for those who seek to resist or oppose it, for those who seek to grapple with its all-too-human fears and desires. At the core of contemporary populism lies illiberal aspirations that seek to colonize every expression of identity and attachment, encompassing all aspects of truth, beauty, piety, resentment, and depravity (Eco 1995). At the dissonant cultural frontiers of populist insurgencies, protagonists continually seek to establish boundaries of affinity and difference, particularly along lines of race, gender, ethnicity and religion.
2. Populism is manifested through a far-reaching division of labour and a thoroughly distributed organizational structure, in which numerous micro-insurgencies continuously intersect. European populism exhibits countless permutations; each aligned with and contingent upon the diverse expressions of cultural identity and social distinction articulated in various dialects and vernaculars. What may seem like isolated beliefs and practices carried out by small groups of local activists are, in fact, interconnected through social media and face-to-face interactions with other groups that are formulating parallel or complementary agendas (Pasieka 2024). These agendas can be swiftly appropriated and refined. What may seem like a tight-knit group of activists engaged in a local insurgency on the outskirts of Gothenburg, Porto, Kraków or Belgrade can be interconnected via social media platforms to countless enthusiasts across the continent and beyond. This connectivity creates a widely distributed political configuration characterized by a diverse array of outlooks that reflect agile articulations of the contentious social, cultural and personal struggles of our time.
3. What is perhaps most appalling and perplexing about populism is not its alien nature, but rather its proximity to our values, values that can be aligned with fundamental elements of familiar philosophical and cultural tradition. Popu-



lism must be understood as integral to the intellectual, sociological, aesthetic and religious traditions of Europe, specifically the enormously complex lineages of the European Romantic traditions, an alternative modernity, informed by virtually every aspect of what we term, all too simplistically, 'humanism' (Berlin 1976, 1979).

4. From the motifs and metaphors found in diverse folkloric traditions to the myriad genres of popular culture, populism operates as 'a style of life', assimilating new meanings and affective predispositions. This functioning highlights populism's capacity to merge, fuse, and synthesize elements that would typically be considered incompatible (Holmes 2019; Shoshan 2016; Teitelbaum 2019). The unsettling premise is that populism functions as a creative force – one that can shape not only our politics but also our feelings, thoughts, intimacies, moods and actions; our perceptions of justice and injustice; our understanding of reality; and ultimately, what we take to be human (Pasieka 2024).
5. Populism is compelling because it resonates with deeply held convictions about the nature of human collectivities, intertwined with specific understandings of individuals' capacities to think, feel, experience and act. While brutality and cruelty are undeniable aspects of our humanity, so too are compassion, sympathy, devotion, rage and indifference. These elements comingle with coercion, repression, opportunism and even humour. Discourses surrounding 'solidarity' and 'care' have become fully integrated into the populist social imaginary. These civic activists insist on the future-oriented trajectory of their politics, foregrounding the moral and ethical nature of their aspirations. They have shrewdly linked their populism with something that can be termed 'progress', revolutionary progress, despite its cloying invocations of the past (Berezin 1997; Buzalka 2020, 2021). Feelings, styles, moods, devotions and desires abound, but they typically do not align with something that can be called populist 'doctrine' or 'ideology' (see Bickerton and Accetti 2021). Populism is not a static ideology; it is in motion and improvised (Gusterson 2021; Loperfido 2018a).
6. Populists seek to define what it means to be human in opposition to that which can annul our humanity. The disenchantments, alienations, estrangements enlivened by liberal democracy, cosmopolitan society, pervasive materialism, unrelenting consumerism and bourgeois individualism are the foils – the enemies – the counter-models of and for contemporary populism (Herzfeld 1987; Kallius and Adriaans 2022; Mazzarella 2019). Young activists decry the bloodless clichés underwriting the secular world and the necrotizing logics im-

pelling global capitalism. They harbour virulent appraisals of capitalist modernity; they embrace wide-ranging and devastating insights – ‘critiques’ – on the dynamics of unrelenting ‘cultural disenchantments’, specifically, ‘its steel-iron casting’, its ‘iron cage’ (Herzfeld 1993; Holmes 1989; Weber 1946).

7. Populist insurgents have brutally exploited the predicaments of immigrants, refugees, and displaced persons to fuel their militancy (Kallius and Adriaans 2020). Issues of gender, transgender identities and reproductive rights and obligations have increasingly taken centre stage in nearly all expressions of populist activism, activism prone to aggressive outbursts and violent confrontations. Equally significant is the intense scrutiny faced by the legal and regulatory frameworks designed to address past injustices, alongside the erosion of basic codes of civility and norms of sympathy and compassion. Human dignity and decency that language affords are under threat, exposing every cosmopolitan role and lifestyle to scrutiny. Professional statuses are challenged, and bastions of elite privilege associated with them are being devalued. In this context, ‘traditional hierarchies’ are being embraced as all-encompassing alternatives, serving as bases for prestige, power, exploitation and treachery. Oppression and repression increasingly encroach as pronatalist agendas predicated on the sanctity of ‘traditional family values’ gain currency.
8. Adherents themselves engage in refining and repurposing every aspect of collective experience, every marker of social distinction, as well as every practice of belonging (Fassin 2013; Holmes 2009). They ask astute and canny questions about the social and economic order. Various strata and segments of the public – an ‘agentive public’ – are thus designing populism on their own terms out of the diverse materials, old and new, circulating in their midst (Buzalka 2015, 2020; Eriksen 2016; Holmes 2023; Loperfido 2018a, 2018b; Shoshan 2022; Stacul 2011, 2014).
9. From the last quarter of the twentieth century, the architects of contemporary populism took the European project seriously, and, again, they have systematically mastered its institutional and, more specifically, its technocratic contradictions and its blatant (and not-so-blatant) hypocrisies (McDonald 1996; Shore 2000; Tonne forthcoming). For them a looming multiracial and multicultural Europe – which they believe is the ultimate purpose of cosmopolitan agendas of integration – is an anathema, foundational to their racialized politics, their circumscription of solidarity and their fraught appraisals of social justice and injustice.



10. The European Parliament, as suggested above, served as a decisive institutional setting in which political movements and parties could, because of different electoral thresholds, attain representation which had typically been denied them on the national level (Holmes 2000; Tonne forthcoming). They coordinated their participation in parliamentary affairs, they formed political groups, they refined a variety of programs, they crafted a rhetorical style, they often disagreed with each other, and yet they found something like a common ground, albeit a shifting one, from which to formulate their scathing attacks on just about every aspect of the EU itself. Under the guise of 'Euroscepticism', they formulated rhetorical positions opposed to every aspect of a cosmopolitan Europe. 'Scepticism' served as a thin cover for their fulminating hatred of virtually the entire supranational agendas of the EU.
11. Rather than abstract economic or technocratic interests, contemporary populists have sought to shape a discourse on Europe in which the nature and dynamics of sovereignty are aligned with the sublime aspiration of identity and personhood (Balibar 1991; Le Pen 1989). And yet, at the same time, they have sought to recast every initiative of the EU for their own material advantage. By so doing they have become skilled at reconfiguring liberal EU projects and programs for the furtherance of illiberal ends. What began in the last two decades as a systematic challenge to the EU's commitment to the 'rule of law' by Polish and Hungarian leaders has given way to an alternative design of Europe, under- and over-written with repressive values (Geva 2021; Orbán 2024; Schmitt 2005; Tonne forthcoming). Leaders have sought to design an illiberal political order by means of the institutional and judicial apparatus of member states – in overt defiance of the EU treaties – to address what they contend are profound civilizational struggles (Orbán 2024). And they have done this largely through democratic means. Populism has been incubated within the institutional project of European integration; its dynamics mirror perversely the historical exigencies of the European project cast against the entrenched powers of its member states (Adenauer 1966; Duchêne 1991; Holmes 2000; McDonald 1996; Shore 1993a; Shore 1993b; Shore 2000).¹ Illiberal, antidemocratic values have licensed, as it were, wide-ranging corruption and incompetence in the service of stark kleptocracy.

1. This configuration of European politics aligns with what Christopher Bickerton and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti (2021) term 'technopopulism', impelled by market forces and the science of public opinion.

12. Members of the populist public are all activists; their agency is decisive in impelling a self-radicalizing mindset (Eriksen 2016). For them, rather than a towering historical formation, populism is manifest in the predicaments of everyday life, in the intimacies and antagonisms of interpersonal relations, in the crosscurrents of community and livelihood. And they, these activists, have demonstrated how populism can be relentlessly insinuated into virtually every register of taste, perception, faith and ardour. They have designed a vitalist (and virulent) politics for their own grounded purposes and pragmatic ends (Buzalka 2020, 2021; Kotwas and Kubik 2019; Loperfido 2018a, 2018b).
13. Virtually all the characteristics of populism described herein are manifest as a function of social media – the ‘digital real’ – most importantly, its self-radicalizing propensities (Boellstorff 2016). Gaming, and the vast, overwhelmingly male culture of gaming, is perhaps paradigmatic of this self-radicalizing potential. Navigating between virtual and face-to-face encounters is now a pivotal, and perhaps overriding, challenge for contemporary analysis on these and related matters (Kallius and Adriaans 2022).

Each of the intersecting observations outlined above requires elaboration and refinement: some are over- or understated, others may prove to be patently wrong. Plainly, more refined analyses, notably addressing the likelihood of violence on issues of race and gender, are needed, as are far broader appraisals of the decisive role of social media. The continuing or enhanced relevance of the post-socialist transition and the enduring divisions it has left across Europe require continual appraisal and reappraisal. The war in Ukraine looms as an excruciating reminder that the violent enthusiasms described herein can be aligned with militarism and terror as a potential, if not resolute, adjunctive of and for contemporary populism.

Conclusions

In this short text I have sought to emphasize the stark challenges operating at the cultural frontier of populist insurgencies, insurgencies that are posing manifold challenges to an enduring liberal-democratic order in Europe. I have further emphasized the emphatic cultural fears and aspirations animating contemporary populism, sensibilities which resist those stylized abstractions and modelling techniques which inform conventional political analyses. Thus, to fully engage the world-historical challenges we face requires a new empirical toolkit, new analytical assumptions, new understandings of the nature and purposes of democratic politics and the efficacy of policy intervention.



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