

‘A search for purity or a search for self-enlargement’: Populism, pragmatism, and the aesthetics of collective self-making

OR:
Populism as universalism: why populist identity-making depends on a commitment to metaphysics

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How can we counter populism, and the polarisation it causes?



Democratic cultures should work to cultivate a commonsensical anti-essentialism in its citizens

How can we counter populism, and the polarisation it causes?



...through completing the postmodern revolution



What is populism?



The populist sentiment fueling both the Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump campaigns



Billionaire Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, left, and Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders, who denounces the "billionaire class," are political opposites united in their outsider status in the presidential primary races. Each is polling strongly in early-voting states. (AFP/Getty Images)

BY KATHLEEN HENNESSEY
AUG. 14, 2015 3 AM PT

Reporting from Washington — If Donald Trump were running against Bernie Sanders in the general election next year, Americans would face a choice between an unabashed capitalist and an enthusiastic socialist. One candidate would rail against the power of the "billionaire class," while the other once said that "part of the beauty of me is that I am very rich."

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What is populism?

...two key features... (1) the central place and role attributed by populists to 'the people' as an agent and source of democratic legitimacy, and (2) the sharply antagonistic worldview that populists put forth, pitting 'the people' against an 'elite' or 'establishment'.

Katsambekis, Giorgos, 'Constructing 'the people' of populism: a critique of the ideational approach from a discursive perspective', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 27.1 (2022), 53–74, p. 53.

What is populism?

...numerous lines of demarcation have emerged between the various research perspectives [on populism]: on the most basic level, in terms of the conceptual status ascribed to populism as **a discourse, frame, ideology, strategy, or style; in addition, and more subtly, in terms of the conceptual and normative presuppositions underlying the different definitional approaches to populism.**

Seongcheol Kim, 'Taking stock of the field of populism research: Are ideational approaches 'moralistic' and post-foundational discursive approaches 'normative'?', *Politics* (2021), 1-13 (p. 2)

What is populism?

"...drop the homogeneity and morality theses as defining elements of populism."

We should attend to the variety of ways populist movements construct "...the people' by means of producing *unity* out of heterogeneity...".

Katsambekis, Giorgos, 'Constructing 'the people' of populism: a critique of the ideational approach from a discursive perspective', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 27.1 (2022), 53–74, p. 69.



What is populism?

From ideational approach

⇒ to discursive

⇒ Populism as a discursive logic that aims to construct unity from, or despite, heterogeneity

But: it's still about the making of collective unity.

I think both the ideational and the discursive approach loses sight of something important about how populist movements make this sense of unity – how the move to unity is legitimised.



What is populist unity? How is it made?

*What characterises the civic understanding
populist communities have of themselves and the
unity, the solidarity, they are creating?*

***Where does the legitimacy of the ideas that unite
them come from?***

One way of viewing populist movements:

*as collectives of commonsensical metaphysicians
(take ideas/truths as given, natural)*

Populist movements make a collective identity by forming around ideas they think are right and true. They might have differences but come together around a canon of shared truths about how things are – and a utopian vision of our collective self-understanding and practices if these truths were upheld by all.



What is the alternative?



...a fundamental choice which confronts the reflective mind: that between accepting the contingent character of starting points, and attempting to evade this contingency.

Richard Rorty, 'Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 53.6 (1980), 719-738 (p. 726).



Rorty's logic of anti-essentialism:

- **“All starting points are contingent”**
(“Pragmatism, Relativism, irrationalism”, 1979)
 - **We, human beings, are the dominant/responsible makers**
 - ***What will we make?***
 - ***How will we go about this?***
- => it is a fundamentally aesthetic attitude***



Rorty: we have no “human nature”. We are “bundles of beliefs”, nodes in a network, woven together, made and remade, we make “practical identities” that help us cope.

Historically: we have to “find ourselves”, who we “truly” are.

Pragmatically: there is no true self. There is what we are made to be, by contingent circumstances, and our own agency.



[An] attempt [to make a self] can take one of two antithetical forms: a search for purity or a search for self-enlargement. The ascetic life commended by Plato and criticized by Nietzsche is the paradigm of the former. The "aesthetic" life criticized by Kierkegaard is the paradigm of the latter. The desire to purify oneself is the desire to slim down, to peel away everything that is accidental, to will one thing, to intensify, to become a simpler and more transparent being. The desire to enlarge oneself is the desire to embrace more and more possibilities, to be constantly learning, to give oneself over entirely to curiosity, to end by having envisaged all the possibilities of the past and of the future. ... On the view I am presenting, [the aesthetic life is] the life of unending curiosity, the life that seeks to extend its own bounds rather than to find its center.

Richard Rorty, 'Freud and moral reflection', in Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2010 (1991)), *Philosophical Papers*, 2, pp. 143–63 (p. 154)



The point... is to find new self-descriptions whose adoption will enable one to alter one's behavior.
...getting some additional suggestions about how to describe (and change) oneself in the future.

Richard Rorty, 'Freud and moral reflection', in Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2010 (1991)), *Philosophical Papers*, 2, pp. 143–63 (p. 153)



⇒ **I want to transpose this to how we make collective identities**

We can form collectives as anti-essentialists

But the logic of formation is different / the attitude from which making happens:

The governing narrative is now **not** that we are on a collective quest for truth – and if we only get there we get it right, and all will assent (the group identity is based on adherence to a canon of truths).

Instead, we see ourselves as engaged in working out, together, what is most useful to say and do. We are working out a practical, amendable identity. We recognize it as a process.

⇒ Ultimately: shifts focus to engage in negotiation of purposes, preferences, and coming together to take action towards these.

POLITICS & POLICY

Sanders and Trump: Two Populist Peas in a Pod?

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Trump at the Iowa State Fair in Des Moines, August 15, 2015. (Win McNamee/Getty)

By **JONAH GOLDBERG**

August 18, 2015, 4:00 AM

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It might thus be possible to suggest that populist movements can be seen as emerging from our culture's commonsensical (and philosophical) commitment to metaphysics (to the idea that there are universal truths).

If we set metaphysics aside, we must make shared conceptions and identities from a stance where we turn not towards each other, to engage in deliberation and negotiation about what is helpful to believe, how it is helpful to talk, and what it is we want to achieve.

What is valued and unites is understood as a contingent product of culture, history, language, our material conditions – and thus amendable, possible to change through deliberation – but still unflinchingly held to be worth fighting for.

Seen from this perspective, one is decidedly more compatible with democratic politics, and democratic progress.



Democratic cultures should work to cultivate a commonsensical anti-essentialism in its citizens