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Introduction

Must we define ‘populism’? Writing almost 130 years after the word was first introduced into the American political vocabulary, the question is now in danger of seeming near to mind-numbingly platitudinal: of all terms in our political vocabulary, it seems indeed the most contestable. In attempting to cope with ‘essential contestability’, scholars in the Cambridge School tradition have turned to contextualist methods to uncover the genealogical histories of political vocabularies. Strangely enough, these tectonic movements in politico-historical scholarship have left the field of contemporary populism studies conspicuously untouched: a majority of academic scholars seem to have no problem with pinning a transhistorical label of political condemnation to it, endowing it with a Parmenidean immutability rarely found in other areas of contemporary political science.

As an exercise in both historical clarification and contemporary political theory, this article seeks to engage seriously with the contextual history of the word ‘populism’ and its uses in post-war European political science. The final analytical objective of such a ‘contextualist’ reading will be to provide an interpretative schema able to account for the *semantic drift* in the use of the concept in post-war European political science from a mildly meliorative and neutral meaning during the 1960s to an intrinsically pejorative understanding of the term in the early 1980s.

Hence this article will trace the origins of the politico-scientific concept of ‘populism’ back to debates within American historiography, referring specifically to the so-called ‘revisionism’ controversy in the 1950s and 1960s, wherein pluralist political scientists such as Edward Shils, Richard Hofstadter, Talcott Parsons and Seymour Martin Lipset waged a highly influential re-articulation of the concept of ‘small-p’ populism in the American context. The article will then deal with reception of pluralistic understandings of small p-populism within European debates in the early 1980s found in the work of Pierre-André Taguieff, investigating how the pluralistic understanding of populism acquired an eminent but nonetheless ambiguous standing in European political science. It will then finally argue that a decisive majority of post-war European political scientists have operated under the analytical spell of the American pluralists. Most important, it seems that recent conceptualisations of ‘populism’ following this tradition lack a historical awareness of the normative implications of the vocabulary they deploy.

‘The bloodiest episode in American historiography’: Re-contextualising the Hofstadter debate, 1955-1970

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Looking at the weekly output of *The Nation* around the beginning of the year 1898, few of the included materials are likely to attract the attention of even the keenest of contemporary political observers. Entering the month of February, America's oldest magazine featured a short commentary about an inquiry into the actions of the so-called 'yellow press', joining a long list of advertisements for products as diverse as French antiquarian books, Irish 'homespun' cotton garments, and a new comparative work on mammalian anatomy.¹ At first glance, one item is likely to catch the eye. In a note, editors sought to warn their readers for the introduction of a curious new term in American political language. It now provides us with a fascinating microcosmic perspective on one of the most successful third-party movements in the history of the United States:

A movement has been started in Kansas for the division of the State into new commonwealths by a north-and-south line. It finds its chief support in the fact that the east and west parts of Kansas are opposed to each other politically, the east being in control of the Populists and the west of the Republicans.²

Together with a plethora of other archival sources, the passage contains one of the first official mentions of the word 'populist' in global intellectual history.³ The movement given the newly coined label was undoubtedly much older. The Senators whose political allegiance lay with the 'People's Party', as it was called, and who were now in the process of convening a possible fusion with the Southern Democrats, had always been wary in demarcating their partisan commitments – theirs was 'a talking and writing party', 'a party of the common man', quite unlike the 'money powers' and 'monopolists' who constituted their main political opponents.⁴ Yet, those parties did have one unassailable advantage: they shared a name pervious to media influence. Everyone knew who was 'a Republican' or 'a Democrat' – yet how was one to classify an alleged 'member of the People's Party'? In 1892, one of the newly joined members of the movement, Democratic Senator Overmyer, decided to provide an antidote to the increasingly knotty issue, introducing the term 'Populist' into the American political vocabulary.⁵

Writing more than half a century later, Harvard intellectual historian Norman Pollack seized on the quoted passage to reflect on recent trends within the historiography of populism. Having finished his doctoral work at America's oldest *alma mater*, Pollack found himself in an increasingly problematic predicament with regards to his scholarly endeavours on agrarian radicalism. The term 'Populist' Overmyer had first introduced into the American political vocabulary was, in his view, in danger of becoming wholly eclipsed by recent developments in the profession. Pollack's own monograph on the movement, aptly entitled *The Populist*

¹ Quoted in Houwen, 'The Non-European Roots', p. 7. For the original, see 'The Week', *The Nation* 66 (February 17, 1898), p. 123. See also, 'The Week', *The Nation* 78 (January 21 1904), p. 39.

² Ibid., p.v; p.123.

³ Discussion persists on the question when the first explicit mention of the concept was made. For an overview, see Houwen, 'The Non-European Roots', pp.5-8; Hicks, *The Populist Revolt*, pp. 238-239.

⁴ Quoted in Charles Postel, 'Introduction: Modern Times', in *The Populist Vision* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 4. See 'St. Louis Globe Democrat', in *Caucasian* (December 1 1892);

⁵ See Houwen, 'The Non-European Roots', p. 7.

Response to Industrial America, had appeared three years earlier, and had mainly constituted a riposte to significant tendencies within American historical writing which sought to 'denigrate' the nineteenth-century Populists as backward-looking, status-ridden, and, worst of all, anti-Semitic in their ideological profile.⁶ While writing in 1965, Pollack stated that 'the last decade and a half have witnessed the unwarranted denigration of Populism, and because Populism has served as the type-form of radicalism, we have seen the unwarranted denigration of the reform tradition in America as well'.⁷ Speaking with a political vista, he urged his colleagues to concede 'that the era of bickering is over' and that the 'new historian' must now turn his eye to the future.⁸ Marxist Norman Pollack took his call from Sartre's plea for a new humanism, stating that the recent obsession with 'consensus' exemplified a 'fear of man' rather than an emancipatory politics. 'What is consensus' asked Pollack 'but the state of mind which clings to the present but cannot plan for the future? The static equilibrium, the ahistorical alone can provide reassurance [...] And to insure this equilibrium, one must have a scapegoat. Balance is attained by eradicating the evil one. Then all is well again'.⁹ At the hands of figures whose frantic longing for equilibrium was almost pathological, Pollack's Populists had befallen an ill fate.

Intellectual historians have often noticed that very few words could offer a more apt indication of the intellectual mood of the American 1950s and 1960s than the all-encompassing shibboleth of 'consensus'.¹⁰ From Talcott Parsons' notion of a 'consensual pluralism', Kenneth Arrow's assertion of a 'consensus on ends', to Rawls' mention of the 'overlapping consensus' in his 1970 *A Theory of Justice*, the question of what was living and what was dead in the 'American value-system' seemed as pressing as ever for post-war social scientists.¹¹ Few professional trends yet offered a more emblematic template of the preoccupation than the so-called 'consensus school', or 'pluralist social theory', which arose in American academia in the mid-1950s. Carried over predominantly by historians Louis Hartz, Nathan Glazer, Oscar Handlin, Arthur Schlesinger Jr, and Richard Hofstadter, together with sociologists Daniel Bell, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Talcott Parsons, the bi-decennial period ranging from 1950 to 1970 saw the heyday of a school of historical and sociological writing whose epochal weight was as controversial as it was gripping.¹² So pervasive

⁶ Norman Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1962), pp. 7-14.

⁷ Norman Pollack, 'Fear of Man: Populism, Authoritarianism, and the Historian', in *Agricultural History* 39 (April 1965), p. 61.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67. For Pollack's Sartrian source, see Jean-Paul Sartre, *Réflexions sur la question juive* (Paris: Paul Morihien, 1947).

¹⁰ See Cynthia Eagle Russett, *The Concept of Equilibrium in American Social Thought* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1966); Alvin Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (London: Heinemann, 1971).

¹¹ Victor Lidz, 'The American Value System: A Commentary on Talcott Parsons' Understanding and Perspective', in *Theory, Culture and Society* 6 (1989), pp. 559-576. See also Thomas Bender, 'Politics, Intellect, and the American University: 1945-1995', in *Daedalus* 195 (1997), p. 35.

¹² I reproduce this list from Peter Novick, whose enumeration offers a comprehensive survey of consensus-writing in the 1950s and 1960s. See Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 339-340.

was the influence of the 'pluralists', that by 1959 John Higham had decided to ascribe the characteristics of a 'cult' – not to be found in any other branch of American academia at the time – to them.¹³

An accusation of political monomania was equally endorsed by Pollack. 'Today I should like to ask', he contended in his critical piece, 'what are the larger implications of the consensus framework? Is it a temporary response to Cold War conditions? If so, how does one account for our excessive fear of admitting that social protest existed in the past, or our zeal in superimposing a pattern of equilibrium on that past, or finally, our alacrity towards Populism?'¹⁴ Consensus historians, Pollack stated, should let go of their dyspeptic habits. 'The time has come', he concluded, 'to call to a halt the erosion of human values, and not only to the denigration of Populism but to that of man himself. Why fear today and tomorrow when we have had a splendid yesterday?'¹⁵ Pollack's plea to not forget the 'splendid yesterday' struck a sensitive chord for fellow historians. Populist-friendly colleagues such as Comer Vann Woodward, Walter Nugent and Theodor Saloutos agreed with his critical assessment of recent trends within American historiography, stating that the last ten years had indeed been a time of political despondence in the profession, and had rendered the case for a regenerated 'American Populism' more difficult than ever.¹⁶

Yet what Pollack saw as 'the denigration of populism' spanned a greater history than he was willing to acknowledge, and in no way was it exclusive to the anthropological pessimism Cold War liberals displayed in the high years of the American-Soviet conflict. Towards the end of the 1930s, Lionel Trilling's *Partisan Review* had already published several critical pieces of the so-called 'populistic' tradition within the wider pantheon of American radicalisms, seeing it as the foremost breeding ground for nativist *ressentiment* and incipient proto-fascism. As literary critic Meyer Schapiro wrote in a 1938 essay published in Trilling's quarterly, 'populist realism', with its 'hatred of the foreign', its 'emphasis on the strong and the masculine', and its 'uncritical and unhistorical elevation of the folk' showed eerie similarities with the fascism which had emerged in the Old World.¹⁷ Similar pieces followed as the United States wrote the epilogue to the Continent's cataclysmic war. In 1944, Columbia sociologist Daniel Bell and Harvard historian Oscar Handlin provided an early assessment of American Jew hatred in the light of recent events in Europe. Even more decisively, a connection between anti-Judaism and Populist ideology was now given full theoretical succour – Bell contended that Populism was the 'grotesque transformation of an originally progressive idea under the influence of

¹³ John Higham, 'The Cult of the American Consensus', in *Commentary* 1 (1959), p. 93. See also John Higham, 'Beyond Consensus: The Historian as a Moral Critic', in *The American Historical Review* 4 (1962), pp. 609-625; Leo Ribuffo, 'What Is Still Living in "Consensus" History and Pluralist Social Theory?', in *American Studies International* 38 (February 2000), pp. 42-60.

¹⁴ Pollack, 'Fear of Man', p. 65. See also Norman Pollack, *The Populist Response*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹⁶ For positive reactions to Pollack's counter-revisionist publications, see Theodor Saloutos, 'Review: *The Populist Response to Industrial America*', in *Technology and Culture* 5 (1963), pp. 455-457.

¹⁷ Quoted in Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, p. 104. For Schapiro's original intervention, see Meyer Schapiro, 'Populist Realism', in *Partisan Review* (January 1938), pp. 56-57.

industrial capitalism'.¹⁸ In Bell and Handlin's words, the same rhetorical tactics deployed by the Populist movement could now be said to have helped 'Führers' mesmerise their 'mass following'.¹⁹ Giving the final *coup de grâce* to the American radicals, Handlin declared that the habit of establishing a 'tie between Jews and finance' had always been a particularly Populist prerogative.²⁰ Bell and Handlin's socio-political work on the origins of American anti-Semitism thus provided the groundwork for the denigratory period Pollack reflected on in his summative review.

More than ten years after their indictment of the Populist tradition in 1944, Richard Hofstadter published *The Age of Reform*. Often considered 'the most influential book on American history to appear in the twentieth-century',²¹ Hofstadter's revisionist assessment of the American Populist movement of the late nineteenth-century set itself an iconoclastic aim: it was to combat some of the most arduous and long-lasting assumptions of academic history as practiced by the Progressive School of Turner, Hicks and Beard, whose influence within the American academe was as titanic as ever.²² With the imaginative wit of the new urbanite, Hofstadter contrasted the Populist 'Agrarian Myth' with the 'Commercial Realities' of the late-nineteenth-century, accusing the Populist farmers of posing as an endangered yeomanry for the sake of winning over American public opinion, while being in reality mere crypto-capitalists, utterly enmeshed in the 'business society' which they themselves claimed to criticise so vocally.²³ Their hatred of processes of financialisation and corporate capitalism could, in Hofstadter's purview, better be explained out of a fear of losing *status*, rather than a steep decline in living standards.²⁴ With the irony so characteristic of the post-war New York Intellectual, Hofstadter delivered a psychological portrait of the nineteenth-century 'farmer-entrepreneur' as divided between economic modernism and cultural traditionalism, perpetually schizophrenic in his defence of the market economy coupled with a plea for pastoral virtues, oscillating between two political poles which could only achieve institutional reconciliation in the 'experimental pragmatism' of the American New Deal.

And yet the main target of Hofstadter's inquiry did not lay within the confines of American historiography. As he noted in his prologue to the 1955 edition, his own scholarly interests into the 'roots of reform' lay very much 'with that side of Populism and Progressivism which seems to foreshadow some aspects of the cranky

¹⁸ Daniel Bell, 'The Grass Roots of American Jew Hatred', in *Jewish Frontier* (June 1944), pp.15–20.

¹⁹ Oscar Handlin, 'American Views of the Jews at the Opening of the Twentieth Century', in *American Jewish Historical Society* (June 1951), pp. 342–343.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 343.

²¹ Greenberg, 'Hofstadter Reconsidered', p.1. See Alan Brinkley, 'Richard Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform: A Reconsideration*', in *Reviews in American History* (September 1985), p. 462.

²² Gillis Harp, 'The Age of Reform and the Crucible of the Fifties', in *Journal of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era* 2 (2007), pp. 139–141.

²³ Richard Hofstadter, 'The Agrarian Myth and Commercial Realities', in *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (London, Jonathan Cape: 1955), pp. 23–59.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 33–34.

pseudo-conservatism of our own time'.²⁵ Hofstadter's underhand reference to the recent McCarthy insurgency betrayed the intellectual impetus underlying his work. 'The process of deconversion from reform to reaction' he noted, 'did not require the introduction of anything wholly new into the political sensibilities of the American public, but only a development of certain tendencies that had existed all along'.²⁶ As he asserted, tendencies such as 'isolationism', 'extreme nationalism', 'anti-Europeanism', 'racial, religious, and nativist phobias', 'resentment of big business', 'anti-intellectualism', all had been found 'not only in opposition to reform but also at times oddly combined with it'.²⁷ The harshest charge on behalf of Hofstadter was the allegation of an 'essential' anti-Semitism in the Populist movement, one often ignored by Hicksian writers. Unearthing its existence, Hofstadter used it to shed light on a 'darker' side of the movement quite at odds with the benevolent evaluations of New Deal historians.²⁸

Having waned in prominence among contemporary historians of American radicalism, Hofstadter's contributions now indeed seem to 'languish in ruin' after more than sixty years of counter-revisionist assault.²⁹ Lack of empirical backing and archival carelessness have devalued his work on Populism as more symptomatic than scholarly, returning it to the status of a cultural artefact rather than a historiographical classic.³⁰ Yet the impact of *The Age of Reform* on the American intellectual scene, as contemporary commentators do not cease to point out, was of undeniable immensity. Not only did Hofstadter's *pièce de résistance* offer one of the most iconoclastic treatises in post-war scholarship, it also provided a template for how later historians and cultural critics were to wage the hazardous task of combining both historical research and social criticism. As his later student Christopher Lasch admitted, Hofstadter's work shared the 'mythic resonance' of earlier Frontier historians such as Turner and Beard, whilst offering a wholly different ideological message.³¹

Such resonance was as much cultural as it was professional. Hofstadter's unrestrained scorn for the 'pseudo-conservatism' of the petty bourgeois McCarthy supporter struck a resounding chord with a new class of intellectuals and social

²⁵ Ibid., p. 32. See Theodor W. Adorno (ed.), *The Authoritarian Personality: Studies in Prejudice* (New York: The Norton Library, 1950).

²⁶ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, p. 33.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 33.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 21-22. For overviews of the controversy around Populist anti-Semitism in the Hofstadter-debate, see Gary Marotta, 'Richard Hofstadter's Populist Problem and his Identity as a Jewish Intellectual', in John Abromeit (ed.), *Transformations of Populism in Europe and the Americas* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), pp. 105-115.

²⁹ The phrase 'languish in ruin' was used by counter-revisionist Lawrence Goodwyn to describe the sorry state of the Hofstadter-thesis after the 1970s, when an increasing number of researchers began to cast doubt on his assertions. See Lawrence Goodwyn, 'Rethinking 'Populism': Paradoxes of Historiography and Democracy', in *Telos* 88 (Summer 1991), p. 42.

³⁰ See Postel, *Populist Vision*, pp.6-7; Walter Nugent, 'Introduction', in *The Tolerant Populists* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 17-18.

³¹ See Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991); Casey Blake and Christopher Phelps, 'History as Social Criticism: An Interview with Christopher Lasch', in *The Journal of American History* 20 (March 1994), p. 1317.

scientists finding themselves increasingly alarmed by the destabilising effects of the McCarthy era mass politics on the American body politic, and who, above all else, saw no analytical merit in class-based analyses of a phenomenon which seemed to them wholly non-economic.

As with Hofstadter, consensualists drew on a variety of traditions to remedy the ills of the class-approach still prevalent in American academia in the early post-war years. Scholars well-acquainted with the finesses of Parsonian action theory could turn to a Paretian account of social agency, which distinguished between 'logical' and 'non-logical' modes of sociality, and separated 'economic' from 'non-economic' motives with regards to political decision-making.³² Implicit in Parsons' inquiry was the omnipresent influence of Weberian social theory, whose instrumental bifurcations between 'status' and 'class', *Zweck-* and *Wertrationalität* provided pluralists with the most potent intellectual tools to wage an explanation of the McCarthy phenomenon. Such an engagement with Weberianism came by no means *ex nihilo*. Rather, the pluralists' appreciation of the Weberian descriptive toolkit originated in a long-standing intellectual interest on behalf of the most dominant pluralists, of which Talcott Parsons was clearly the foremost example. For other pluralists of the likes of Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Bell, and Seymour Martin Lipset, the first comprehensive encounter with the subtleties of Weberian sociology dated back to the 1940s, when a series of research seminars on the German sociologist was set up at Columbia.³³ Whilst drawing on the translation work done by American predecessors C. Wright Mills and the Harvard Pareto Circle, a miscellaneous group of researchers and historians set up a seminar on 'the State' in New York's distinguished research institution in late 1945, only to continue their weekly meetings well into the inter-disciplinary 1950s.

The professional purpose of the group, as its leading contributor William Leuchtenburg was later to recall, was to put the state back at the centre of political analysis.³⁴ Frustrated by the recent lack of attention historians and social scientists had attributed to the subject, his luminaries thereby sought to restore the Weberian *Rechtsstaat* to the status of a crucial unit of political science. The seminar's main contributors – comprising a variable circle ranging from Robert Merton to Seymour Martin Lipset to Daniel Bell, Richard Hofstadter, George Stigler, *inter alia* – were later to become leading figures within their respective intellectual habitus, producing work which was to revolutionise the prism through which post-war academics viewed the social world.³⁵ It was in the seminar rooms of what Daniel Bell himself called the 'Upper West Side Kibbutz' – referring to the considerable number of

³² For an overview of the Parsonian distinction and its Paretian pedigree, see Isaac, 'Making A Case: the Harvard Pareto Circle', in *Working Knowledge: Making the Human Sciences from Parsons to Kuhn* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 63-91.

³³ For overviews of the Weberian influence within the pluralist school, see Isaac, *Working Knowledge*, p.161, p.244; Ira Katznelson, 'Seminar on the State', in *Desolation and Enlightenment: Political Knowledge after Total War, Totalitarianism, and Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 86-112; Lawrence Scaff, 'The Work in America', in *Max Weber in America* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 197-251.

³⁴ William Leuchtenburg, 'The Uses and Abuses of History', in *History and Politics Newsletter* 2 (Fall 1991), pp. 6-7. See Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment*, pp. 86-87.

³⁵ See Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment*, pp. 96-98.

researchers of Jewish origin which the group counted among its ranks – that the diagnoses of the nineteenth-century populists and their twentieth-century avatars as status politicians were first coined.³⁶ While drawing on the combined heritage of Durkheimian sociology, Mannheim's mass-society theory, Weberian social theory and the first 'psychohistorical' works carried out by the Frankfurt School, pluralists provided a coherent vision of 'populistic' politics as characterised by status anxiety and psychological inflexibility.³⁷

Almost unavoidably now, a barrage of similar criticisms was to follow on behalf of Hofstadter's intellectual allies. In 1957, G.I.-turned-social scientist Victor Ferkiss published a series of articles stipulating the ideological consanguinity of Populism and Fascism, stating, in an article entitled 'Populist Influences on American Fascism', that the motives of the American Populist were similar to those of 'the rank-and-file twentieth-century Fascist'.³⁸ Although marginal with respect to some more historically sensitive critics, Ferkiss's acidic evaluations were keenly followed up. In 1956, Chicago anthropologist Edward Shils published *The Torment of Secrecy*, in which a historical exegesis of the roots of modern 'paranoid politics' was coupled with an increasingly liberal use of the epithet 'populistic' to denote dangerous forms of mass democracy.³⁹ He echoed the later shibboleth of Cold War Liberalism in its 'theory of the extremes', seeing both in Communism and Nazism an equal threat to his pluralistic conception of liberal political order.⁴⁰ In doing so, Shils cemented a definition of 'populism' as a generic form of plebiscitarian politics. 'Populism' he stated, 'acclaims the demagogue who, breaking through the formalistic barriers erected by lawyers, pedants and bureaucrats, renews the righteousness of government and society. Populism is impatient of checks and balances [...] and it disregards the boundaries of institutions'.⁴¹ Shils traded a final blow to the hydra of 'small-p' populism with his statement that 'the nearly ten-year-long disturbance of public peace by the angry quest for publicity about conspiracy' – referring to the recent calls for disclosure issued on behalf of the McCarthy zealots – had been its main historical achievement.⁴²

The pluralist onslaught was not to abate any time soon. In 1955, a group of intellectuals based at Harvard's Department of Social Relations and Columbia's History faculty undertook a combined effort to publish a collection of pieces on the cultural sources of McCarthyism. Edited by Daniel Bell, the book provided an

³⁶ See Novick, *That Noble Dream*, pp.343-344; Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, p.73; Ribuffo, 'What Is Still Living', p. 48.

³⁷ For the influence of Durkheimian sociology, see Edward Shils, 'Charisma, Order and Status', in *American Sociological Review* 30 (April 1965), p. 201.

³⁸ Victor Ferkiss, 'Populist Influences on American Fascism', in *The Western Political Quarterly* 10 (June 1957), p. 367.

³⁹ Edward Shils, *The Torment of Secrecy: The Background and Consequence of American Security Policies* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1956).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

⁴¹ Shils, *Torment of Secrecy*, p. 236.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 237.

encyclopaedic survey of populist politics as defined by pluralist political scientists.⁴³ Taken as a whole, *The New Radical Right* gave the pluralists' attack on 'small-p' populism its most emblematic expression. In 1959, William Kornhauser took the charge even further in his classic of post-war American social theory, *The Politics of Mass Society*, in which 'populism' was seen as the emissary of all political evils that had befallen both the Old and New Worlds of late.⁴⁴ In the case of 'populism', Kornhauser wrote, 'the uniformity of opinion among large numbers of people becomes the supreme standard, superordinate to traditional values, professional standards, and institutional autonomy'.⁴⁵ Further blows were to follow. In 1963, Hofstadter delivered his famed lecture on the 'paranoid style in American politics' at Oxford, again noting the congruity between Populism and McCarthyism in their discursive stratagems, thereby further entrenching the pejorative definition of the term.⁴⁶

The pluralist episode in American populism scholarship and its counter-revisionist critics

By planting itself within a variety of intellectual traditions, the conceptual transformations to which the pluralists submitted the historiographical tool of 'small-p populism' were confusingly manifold. While previously only reserved for specific debates within American social and political history, and therefore pertaining to some rather strict temporal demarcations, the newly conjured tool of 'populism' proved to be a concept of high analytic elasticity, with a multitude of semantic dimensions now to be taken in account. Overseeing these multidimensional understandings of the word, five new distinct meanings can be highlighted:

- populism as a *political style*, comprising a rhetorical, rather than substantive conception of 'paranoid politics'. In its invocation of the 'people' as the sole source of political legitimacy, it is akin to 'anti-elitism', although more ideologically articulated than merely contrarian politics. Equivocally synonymous with 'demagoguery' (Hofstadter, Ferkiss, Bell).
- populism as *plebiscitarianism*, signifying a demand for direct democracy and anti-constitutionalist rule, hostile to representative liberal democracy and pluralist interest-group politics. A variant of Rousseauian 'monism' in the Berlinian sense, meaning 'democracy without the rule of law' (Shils, Lipset).
- populism as *status politics* or *cultural politics*, representing a political ideology in which status-concerns and non-class based, subjective motivations for social action were seen as prevailing over rational decision-making (Shils, Lipset,

⁴³ Originally published in 1955 as *The Radical Right*, it saw a later updated version in 1963 to include the recent Goldwaterite episode in the Republican leadership election, including auxiliary essays by Lipset and Hofstadter. See Daniel Bell (ed.), *The Radical Right* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1955); Daniel Bell (ed.), *The New Radical Right* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1963).

⁴⁴ William Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1959). See also Lasch, *True and Only Heaven*, pp. 454-455, for an overview of Kornhauser's intervention in contemporary light.

⁴⁵ Kornhauser, *Politics of Mass Society*, p. 103.

⁴⁶ Richard Hofstadter, 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics', in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 3-40.

Parsons).

- populism as a *mass political movement*, exemplifying a pathology of unconsummated processes of political modernization, pointing to an 'asynchronism' between economic, social, political and cultural trends in developing societies (Kornhauser, Shils, Lipset).
- populism as a *political tradition*, characterised by rural *romanticism* and *anti-intellectualism*, exemplified by the 'yeoman myth' and other nostalgic forms of politics. Hostile to cosmopolitanism and wary of financial and intellectual elites (Hofstadter, Bell).

This analytical plasticity of the concept ensured that the guardians' innovations did not go unassailed in American academia's high circles. Unlike any other work of American history, *The Age of Reform* was to initiate a period of fierce strife between different denominational schools, making it into, as one commentator noted, 'one of the bloodiest episodes in American historiography'.⁴⁷ Most of the Progressive writers had kept quiet over the shortcomings of Hofstadter's inquiry when it first came out – John Hicks labelled *The Age of Reform* a 'revolutionary' work in American historiography, while Comer Vann Woodward, a personal friend of Hofstadter's, judged its empirical deficiencies subordinate to its masterly rendering of a highly contentious episode in American history.⁴⁸ It was only when most classical historians noticed the increasingly liberal use with which pluralists deployed the 'p-word' in public debates, that Progressives sounded alarm over its academic cogency.

Responses by counter-revisionists came in two forms. The first concerned an explicit empirical debunking of some of the claims brought forward by the consensus theorists, highlighting factual errors that could not be kept integer even with scholarly diplomacy. Norman Pollack, for example, went far in showing the paucity of the pluralists' claim that the Populist movement had 'activated' the majority of American anti-Jewish sentiment, showing that such statements were based on scanty archival evidence.⁴⁹ Following up on Pollack, Southern historian Walter Nugent published his first edition of *The Tolerant Populists* in 1963, whose regional focus on the Kansas Populism of the 1880s Farmers' Alliances hinted at the fact that nativism, anti-immigrant sentiment and Judaic aversion were by no means exclusively 'Populist' prerogatives.⁵⁰ Similar statements were to follow swiftly on behalf of other Southern historians. In 1960, Comer Vann Woodward, although sympathetic to Hofstadter's initial scholarly achievements in *The Age of Reform*, composed a piece on the 'Populist Heritage and the Intellectual', in which he urged the pluralist critics' temperance in

⁴⁷ Ostler, 'Rhetoric of Conspiracy', p. 1.

⁴⁸ See Harp, 'The Crucible of the Fifties', p.140. See also John D. Hicks, 'Politics in Pattern', in *The Saturday Review*, (October 1955), p. 12.

⁴⁹ Norman Pollack, 'Hofstadter on Populism: A Critique of "The Age of Reform"', in *The Journal of Southern History* 4 (November 1960), pp. 478-500; Pollack, 'Fear of Man', pp.59-67; Norman Pollack, 'The Myth of Populist Anti-Semitism', in *The American Historical Review* 1 (October 1962), pp. 76-80; Norman Pollack, 'Introduction', in *The Populist Mind* (New York: The Bobbs-Merill Company, 1967), pp. xxi-xxv

⁵⁰ See Walter Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) for an updated version of the 1963 edition. See Creech, 'Legacy of Walter Nugent', pp. 142-144, for a discussion of the Nugentian intervention.

their historical indictments.⁵¹ 'I wonder' Woodward had contended in a 1959 letter to Hofstadter,

about the usefulness of retaining either 'Populism' or 'populism' as the designation of what we are talking about [...] Isn't what we are talking about in the case of 'small-p' populism the ancient fallacies of the democratic dogma, its tendency to glorify the masses, to bow before the majority, to minimize the importance of liberty, to give short shrift to minorities, to undervalue excellence, to override dissent, to sacrifice everything (including reality) for the sake of unanimity. What you aptly called 'the utopian diffusion of social decision'.⁵²

The charge was polite but firm. Detecting the exchangeability of 'populism' and the 'democratic dogma' in pluralist dialects, Woodward rebutted that such an equation needed not imply a return to the nineteenth-century for 'our classic prototype'.⁵³ Conspiratorial tactics, Woodward contended, were by no means a Populist prerogative: Know-Nothings and American Whigs shared an equal burden in the propounding of Hofstadter's 'paranoid style'.⁵⁴ Above all else, counter-revisionists found themselves in deep conflict with consensualists about the linear continuity which they had drawn between nineteenth-century Populism and American McCarthyism. For many pluralists, such a statement was backed up by reference to the geographical ancestry of the senator's following, whose home state, Wisconsin, had been a hotbed of Granger radicalism and isolationist sentiment in the late nineteenth-century.⁵⁵ Yet counter-revisionists saw in such a geographical proximity between McCarthyism and the Populism of yesteryear no more than a fortuitous fit of interpretation. 'McCarthy', Progressive historian Theodore Saloutos noted, 'was neither interested in the regulation of railroads or increasing the power of government' – two directives which the nineteenth-century Populists had expressed so programmatically in their 1892 Omaha statement.⁵⁶ In his mentioned letter to Hofstadter, Woodward put forward the contention that a close study of the McCarthy movement 'would reveal a considerable element of college-bred, established-wealth, old-family, industrialist support' – a social base quite different from the one on which nineteenth-century reformists had drawn their 'mass appeal'.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Comer Vann Woodward, 'The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual', in *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), pp. 141-166.

⁵² Comer Vann Woodward '125: Letter to Richard Hofstadter', in Michael O'Brien (ed.), *The Letters of Comer Vann Woodward* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 197-198.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁵⁴ Woodward, '125: Letter to Hofstadter', p. 198.

⁵⁵ See Lipset, *Political Man*, 296-297; Lipset, 'The Sources of the Radical Right', pp. 166-168.

⁵⁶ Saloutos, 'The Professors and the Populists', p. 237.

⁵⁷ Woodward, '125: Letter to Hofstadter', pp. 198-199. Rogin's *The Radical Spectre* is now seen as having successfully debunked the pluralists' contention that McCarthyism drew on the same social bases as Grangerism and Populism in the nineteenth-century, taking issue with Lipset's claim that Populism was a form of 'working-class authoritarianism'. Already in the 1960s some political scientists referred to the pluralist thesis as the consequence of the 'grossest ecological fallacy in post-war political science'. See Rogin, *The Radical Spectre*, passim; James Green, 'Review: *The Radical Spectre: The Intellectuals and McCarthy* by Michael Paul Rogin', in *Historical Methods Newsletter* 1 (December 1968),

The question remained anathematic to counter-revisionists throughout the 1960s. Even more clearly now, the debate between revisionists and counter-revisionists showed itself not to be concerned with questions of petty empiricism, and as for their second charge against the consensualists, anti-pluralists now sought to attack the methodological foundations of the pluralist edifice.⁵⁸ 'To rest a historical interpretation on status resentment or status mobility is a tricky business', Nugent concluded, 'since these concepts... are more assumed than proven'.⁵⁹ In using concepts such as prejudice, nativism, anti-Semitism, scapegoat-seeking, status mobility, and the like, pluralist critics made themselves vulnerable to eclectic contaminations, endowing them with a 'certitude that behavioural science did not, and may not ever, give them'.⁶⁰ The same verdict was issued on the Shilsian equation between 'populism' and 'plebiscitarianism', showing that support for plebiscitary democracy was by no means the ultimate aim of the Populist insurrection.

Although it shared all the criteria of an ill-defined, confused and plainly wrong academic theorisation, by the early 1960s the pluralist understanding of 'populism' was well on its way to undertake an assault on public discourse. Writing in 1962, counter-revisionist Norman Pollack complained about the introduction of the word 'populistic' in American everyday language, conceding a prior victory to the public reception of the pluralists' theses, while progressive historian Theodore Saloutos noted how the pluralists' attacks on the nation's radical heritage had inflicted blows which were becoming ever harder to heal.⁶¹ Other progressives complained about how the epithet 'populistic' now was becoming an easy synonym for nativism, anti-Semitism and anti-intellectualism, highlighting this liberal use by both political scientists and journalists alike. Two years later, Rogin delivered on his initial diagnosis of pluralistic populism, stating that, 'before the pluralists wrote',

McCarthyism meant something like character assassination, and Populism was the name of a particular historical movement for social reform at the end of the nineteenth-century. Through their influence Populism has become an example of a general term for anomic movement of mass protest against existing institutions – the type of movement typified by McCarthyism.⁶²

As noted by Rogin and a long list of later critics, the invention of the 'small-p' epithet of 'populistic politics' still provides the most important disciplinary matrix from which later politico-scientific elaborations of the concept were to draw. The fact that American and European political science had no place for the very concept of 'small-p' populism prior to mid-1950s shows the inescapable ancestry of the word, and any understanding of how 'populism' rose to the status of a highly versatile tool of

9-12; Theodor Saloutos, 'Review: *The Radical Spectre: The Intellectuals and McCarthy* by Michael Paul Rogin', in *Agricultural History* 43 (July 1969), pp. 321-322.

⁵⁸ See Rogin, *Radical Spectre*, passim. For an overview of the increasingly personal dimension of the Pollack-Hofstadter debate, see Collins, 'The Originality Trap', pp. 154-155.

⁵⁹ Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists*, p. 25.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁶¹ See Pollack, *Populist Response*, p.6; Saloutos, 'The Professors and the Populists', p. 252.

⁶² Quoted in Margaret Canovan, *Populism* (London: Junction Books, 1981), p. 184. Rogin, *Radical Spectre*, p. 201.

political analysis in Europe as in America must take into account the contextual co-ordinates from which the pluralists approached it.

These co-ordinates, as argued in this paper, are best examined under what Anthony Giddens has called a methodological 'double hermeneutic'; since social scientists, as Peter Galison notes, always operate with tools which are both contextual and conceptual, prescriptive and descriptive, they tend to shape the very objects they propound to observe. This double status of pluralism as both a political creed and an epistemic model became ever more apparent during the course of the 1960s. In 1967, when consensus-theory and pluralism were steadily approaching their baroque phase, Seymour Martin Lipset issued his call for a return to 'the vital centre' in American politics, seeing that an extremism of the left and the right were both commensurable in their mutual rejection of interest-based politics.⁶³ As expected, Cold War liberal Lipset looked for family resemblances between both movements he sought to criticise in his act of political triangulation, and turned to the concept consensus-historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. had theorised in the late 1940s.⁶⁴ Since both 'Communism' and 'Nazism' showed equal signs of a 'populist' heritage in their respective ideological profiles, pluralists could use it as an 'asymmetric counter-concept' capable of denouncing political opponents.⁶⁵

Adherents of *Begriffsgeschichte* have, of course, long been acquainted with such a use of the notion of an 'asymmetric counter-concept'. Posited against the positive value of 'pluralism', 'populism' could be used to describe a variety of movements that did not qualify for the parameters of mediatory politics: German Nazism, Latin American social movements, Maoism in China, French Poujadism.⁶⁶ Most importantly, the pluralists' conception did not allow for the defining feature of the Koselleckian theorisation: the possibility of a mutual recognition with regards to classificatory schemes.⁶⁷ Although the word 'populist' could often still be used as a positive ascription in parts of American political life in the 1960s – historian Comer Vann Woodward's own theoretical trajectory, for example, paid sufficient testimony to this fact – the period was yet also characterised by a distinct shift in meaning in the originally Progressive understanding of the term.⁶⁸ Even politicians who claimed to operate within a tradition of Southern radicalism began to disavow classifications of 'populistic', seeing the term as derogatory rather than laudatory. Such a trend could be observed most explicitly during the course of the 1968 presidential run of

⁶³ See Lipset, *Political Man*, pp.130-136; Daniel Bell, 'The Dispossessed', in *The Radical Right* (New York: Anchor Books, 1962), pp. 1-46; Rogin, *Radical Spectre*, pp. 15-20.

⁶⁴ See Seymour Martin Lipset 'Values, Education, and Entrepreneurship', in Seymour Martin Lipset and Aldo E. Solari, (eds.), *Elites in Latin America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

⁶⁵ See Reinhart Koselleck, 'The Historical-Political Semantics of Asymmetric Counter-Concepts', in *Futures Past: the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 155-191. See also Glynos and Howarth, *Logics*, pp. 110-115, for a similar understanding of the term relying on the category of post-structuralist 'dislocation'.

⁶⁶ This overview of different populist movement was first made by Seymour Martin Lipset in his *Political Man*. See Lipset, *Political Man*, p. 113, pp. 130-136; p.167.

⁶⁷ See Koselleck, 'Historical-Political Semantics', pp. 155-156. See also Houwen, 'The Non-European Origins of the Concept of Populism', in pp. 18-20.

⁶⁸ See Comer Vann Woodward, '205: To Michael O'Brien', in *The Letters of Comer Vann Woodward* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 293-295.

George Wallace, whose own upbringing within the Southern-Populist tradition was ambiguous at best. Speaking to an interviewer during the course of the campaign, Wallace himself complained that “populism” in the sense that these pseudointellectuals use it carries overtones of anti-one religion or another. They don't dare charge me with that, so they just say “populism”.⁶⁹ According to Wallace's own interpretation, the term had now become nothing more but ‘a highbrow smear’, serving as a facile token of political condescension.⁷⁰ Although steeped in vitriol, Wallace's own observations did register one important feature of the semantic transformation the word underwent during the course of the 1960s: its transformation from a historiographical reference to a straightforwardly polemical concept in journalistic and academic discourse.

It was precisely such an intimate interdependence between praxis and theory which appeared perilous to anti-pluralists. Not only was the theorisation of pluralistic ‘populism’ empirically dubious; in their view, it also suffered from a schizophrenic duplicity in the way it functioned both as an analytical and a polemical concept. What Vernon Aspaturian noted with regards to the notion of ‘Eurocommunism’ in European political language, can be here readily transposed into our analysis of the word ‘populism’ and its uses in American political language. ‘It must be stated at the outset’, Aspaturian notes, ‘that the calculated attempt to convert an impressionistic label burdened with inevitable polemical and normative baggage into an analytical concept is a hazardous business. Such a concept can never completely escape its origins, and its semantic ancestry will inevitably continue to cast a shadow over its analytical functionality’.⁷¹ Like Impressionism in the field of modern art, one is tempted to follow Aspaturian in his statement that pluralistic ‘populism’ was not a self-designated label, but found its intellectual origins with critics rather than proponents.⁷² The ideological and empirical deficits of ‘small-p’ populism, although keenly noticed by critics, were not to be remedied in coming years, and its peregrinations within the Western academe proved to be a highly promiscuous process.

Receptions of the pluralist ‘populism’ in Europe, 1984-2005

Sufficient historiographical notice has been paid to the fact that, as a pejorative pronoun, ‘populism’ was quite the latecomer on the European academic scene. With regard to the classical pantheon of political phraseology attached to the politically cranky and mischievous – such as ‘demagoguery’, ‘philistinism’, or ‘fascism’ – ‘populism’ was only gradually introduced in the late 1970s, finally to be established as a fully-fledged instrument of political abuse in the late 1980s.⁷³ When the first reports on so-called ‘populist movements’ began to percolate into European

⁶⁹ Quoted in Niels Bjerre-Poulsen, ‘Populism: A Brief Introduction to a Baffling Notion’, in *American Studies in Scandinavia* 18 (1986), p. 27.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁷¹ Vernon Aspaturian, ‘Conceptualizing Eurocommunism: Some Preliminary Observations’, in *Eurocommunism Between East and West* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1980), pp. 3-4.

⁷² Aspaturian, ‘Conceptualizing Eurocommunism’, p. 4.

⁷³ See Houwen, ‘The Non-European Roots’, pp. 26-28; Taguieff, ‘Populismes et anti-populismes’, pp. 5-7.

discourse, they were treated with a distinct air of exoticism and quaintness (this was a 'relatively novel concept', as one commentator remarked) and were seen as pertaining to a context wholly alien to European political culture.⁷⁴ In 1967, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir included in their weekly *Les Temps Modernes* a lengthy treatise by Brazilian scholar Francisco Weffort on the topic of Brazilian populism. In the article, the movement was cast as an ambiguous but yet ideologically pertinent phenomenon, spelling out clear lessons for contemporary French politics.⁷⁵ As Weffort wrote, populism 'should be seen as a circumstantial and spontaneous expression of the process of incorporation of the masses into the political regime',⁷⁶ offering the chance of an infusion of 'political dynamism' into a petrified state structure.⁷⁷ This moderately meliorative treatment of the term within the French political scene stands in heavy contrast with Bernard-Henri Lévy's 1994 tract *La pureté dangereuse*, published thirty years after Sartre and De Beauvoir's featuring of 'Vargasianism', in which the p-word was endowed with responsibility for every political crime under the 'postmodern' sun: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, fascism, communism, tribalism, thereby embodying the 'Absolute Evil' of contemporary politics for the author in question.⁷⁸

Such a semantic drift testified to a profound attitudinal change in how political scientists approached a dizzyingly chameleonic concept. Only three years after Stuart Hall had detected a tendency towards 'authoritarian populism' within the politics of the Thatcher-administration, Pierre-André Taguieff provided the first explicit classification of the rising National Front under Jean-Marie Le Pen as 'national-populist' in his 1984 text 'La rhétorique du national-populisme'.⁷⁹ Taguieff's text constituted a daring conceptual innovation. While previous political scientists and reporters had adhered to a classical reading of the Front National as 'nationalist', 'extreme right' or 'poujadist', Taguieff saw in Jean-Marie Le Pen a decisively new kind of political leader, whose charismatic authority bore little resemblance to the 'nostalgia for French Algeria' which had characterised the old French Right.⁸⁰ Relying on a multiplicity of theoretical resources – including pluralist treatments of the New Radical Right by Daniel Bell and Lipset, 'modernist' theories of populism found in Germani and Di Tella, and semi-Marxist understandings of the topic in Laclau – Taguieff went on to construct a wholly new theoretical apparatus to explain the rise

⁷⁴ See Taguieff, 'Populismes et anti-populismes', p. 5.

⁷⁵ See Francisco Weffort, 'Le populisme dans la politique brésilienne', in *Les temps modernes* (October 1967), pp. 624-649. See Taguieff, 'Le populisme', p. 13.

⁷⁶ Francisco Weffort, 'State and Mass in Brazil', in *Studies in Comparative International Development* (1966), p. 196.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Taguieff, 'Le populisme', p.6. For the original, see Bernard-Henri Lévy, *La pureté dangereuse* (Paris: Grasset, 1994).

⁷⁹ See Pierre-André Taguieff, 'La rhétorique du national-populisme', in *Mots* 9 (1984), pp. 112-139; Pierre-André Taguieff, *Le nouveau national-populisme* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2013), p. 70. Later critics such as Annie Collovald have consistently pointed out his agency in first coining the term.

⁸⁰ See Pierre-André Taguieff, 'Populismes et anti-populismes' in *Mots* 55 (1998), *passim*; Annie Collovald, 'Poujadisme: histoire d'un mot de passe', in *Genèses* 3 (March 1991), pp. 97-119.

of 'populism' in Europe.⁸¹ 'The demagogue', Taguieff noted, 'relies on the reduction of uncertainties presented as a set of simple solutions', together with 'an accumulation of affirmations' and 'the absolutisation of the enemy'.⁸²

Surreptitiously, the Taguieffian manoeuvre laid claim to a long-lasting influence within the European academe. Its influence did not so much express itself in the fact that some academics now adopted his 'stylistic', 'thin-centred' conception of populism as the definitive conceptual account of the subject, but rather in the fact that almost every academic progenitor consented to his initial habit of conscription: calling the FN populist. By stringing an umbilical chord between the 1980s National Front and the historical denominator of 'discursive populism', Taguieff might not have settled the linguistic disputes over the concept (which remained, as commentators remarked, 'essentially contestable') but it did leave a lasting mark on what later academics saw as one of the necessary classifications connected to it.⁸³ Although the definitional content of the word was by no means clear, its 'ascriptional' qualities now seemed straightforward: since the Front National was to be seen as 'populist', a cogent definition of the word should be able to comprise all of the precepts set out by Le Pen and his movement.

Matters were only to become further complicated with French journalists latching on to Taguieff's newly crafted tool, giving it back the polemical status it had so controversially held in post-war American debates. When commentators started to deploy the word to describe the electoral tactics of the rising Front National in the late 1980s and 1990s, a particular 'looping effect' in the party with regards to classificatory schemes began to take place.⁸⁴ Rather than disavowing classifications of the epithet as pejorative or absent-minded, Le Penians themselves now decided to wear it as a token of political honour. In a fascinating act of political re-appropriation, the leader of the FN declared himself a 'convinced populist', in opposition to his scorn towards the 'xenophobia' and 'racism' which commentators normally tended to attribute to him. In 1988, Jean-Pierre Stirbois and Olivier Mégret, politicians in charge of tactics for the party's study centre, sought to rework the classical programme the FN had relied on, now fully endorsing its 'national-popular' image. As Stirbois himself declared:

I retake with pride the expression of 'national-populism' [...] In 'national-populism' there are two words – 'nation' and 'people' – which are, in my view, inextricably connected to that to which I am strongly, viscerally attached. 'National-populism' carries its name with pride, it is a phenomenon which is truly, authentically popular.⁸⁵

⁸¹ See Pierre-André Taguieff, 'Le populisme et la science politique', pp. 4-33. See also Pierre-André Taguieff, 'Mobilisation national-populiste en France: vote xenophobe et nouvel antisémitisme politique', in *Lignes I* (1990), pp. 89-136.

⁸² Taguieff, 'La rhétorique', pp. 125-131.

⁸³ See Taguieff, 'Populismes et anti-populismes', pp. 5-17; Surel and Mény, 'Populism the Pathology', pp. 143-154, for an overview of French writing.

⁸⁴ See Hacking, *Historical Ontology*, pp. 98-106.

⁸⁵ 'Je reprends avec fierté cette expression de national-populisme.. Dans national-populisme, il y a deux mots – 'peuple' et 'nation' – qui sont, à mon sens, indissolublement liés, et auxquels je suis profondément, viscéralement attaché... Le national-populisme porte bien son nom, c'est un phénomène profondément, authentiquement populaire...' (own translation) Quoted in Taguieff,

Gradually, such statements became standardised within the ideological postulates of the party. In 1991, Jean-Marie Le Pen himself declared his allegiance to a specific understanding of the term as 'a regard for the opinion of the people'. 'If that is the definition of populism', he stated with aplomb, 'then I am a populist'.⁸⁶

Le Pen's paradiastolic re-appropriation of the term went hand in hand with a process of ideological renewal within the party. Having shed its previous connotation with the extreme right, the appropriation of the term brought about a decisive change in tactical thinking for its intellectual cadres. Their immersion in Gramscian political theory ensued towards the early 1990s.⁸⁷ Their reliance on the supposedly 'populist' works of the French New Right philosopher Alain de Benoist provided their programmes for a regenerated 'republican France' with intellectualised backing.⁸⁸ During the European elections of 1994, French media made even more liberal use of the 'small-p populism' epithet to now denote both the political tactics of Front candidates *and* rising left-wing candidate Bernard Tapie.⁸⁹ In a remarkably diachronic turn of phrase, French political scientists now turned to a revamped 'theory of extremes' in the form of the 'horse-shoe' theory to describe the formal similarities between the tactics of both candidates.⁹⁰ In 1994, the word 'populism' established itself as the solid synonym for political irrationalism, demagoguery, anti-elitism and chauvinism, constituting a political *passepartout* unlike any other term in the French political vocabulary. The features which the American pluralists had first ascribed to the term – plebiscitarianism, irrationalism, romanticism – were now recycled into the jargon of postmodern media analyses. Simultaneously, a militant 'anti-populism' was on the rise on behalf of politicians purportedly still adhering to a 'reasonable' form of politics not based on denunciation and rhetorical absolutism.⁹¹

In 1996, French commentator Serge Halimi declared the term to be heuristically useless and historically confused. 'The appellation of "populism"', he noted in *Le monde diplomatique*, 'serves the task of occulting the real questions to be asked'.⁹² Despite such warnings, European political scientists saw no evil in further reproducing such uses of the term. Unconscious of the normative implications the Taguieffian application brought with it, its liberal usage exposed the undigested

'Populismes et anti-populismes', p. 16. Original in Jean-Pierre Stirbois, 'Etre national, ou nationaliste', in *Tonnerre de Dreux* (1988), pp. 215-216.

⁸⁶ 'Si c'est cela, alors oui, je suis populiste' (own translation). Quoted in Taguieff, 'Populismes et anti-populismes', p. 17. For the original, see Jean-Marie Le Pen, 'J'accéderai au pouvoir par la voie démocratique', in *Aspects de la France* 220 (October 1991), p. 9.

⁸⁷ See Tom McCulloch, 'The Nouvelle Droite in the 1980s and 1990s: Ideology and Entryism, The Relationship with the Front National', in *French Politics* 4 (2006), pp. 160-165, for an overview of 'right-wing' Gramscianism in the Front's populist turn.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 170-172.

⁸⁹ See Gerard Grunberg, 'La mesure du populisme: sur quelques questions de méthode', in *Mots* 55 (June 1988), pp. 122-127; Maurice Agulhon et al., 'Le populisme?' in *Vingtième siècle – revue d'histoire* (October 1997), pp. 224-242.

⁹⁰ For a French version of the 'theory of extremes' so prevalent in pluralist discourses, see Jean-Pierre Faye, *Le siècle des ideologies* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2006).

⁹¹ See Taguieff, 'Populismes et anti-populismes', pp. 6-10.

⁹² See Serge Halimi, 'Le "populisme", voilà l'ennemi', in *Mots* 55 (1996), p. 115.

heritage of its pluralist forebears. The generalising tendency of Kornhauser and Lipset was displayed in the ascription of the word to a miscellaneous collection of individuals such as Pericles, Adolf Hitler, Mussolini, and Robespierre.⁹³ The plebiscitarianism implicit in the Shilsian account, which established an equation between ‘populism’ and ‘direct democracy’ in its demands for ‘government of the people’, sufficed to classify every political actor who dared to utter demands for political participation in the age after Mitterrand’s *tournant de la rigueur* as ‘a demagogic populist’. A notion of ‘populism’ as ‘pathology’, analytically akin to the ‘disease of transition’ discussed by theorists of modernization, was now transplanted into a new mythology of ‘status anxiety’ on behalf of the European radical right, whose obsession with societal stature and lower educational backgrounds could explain their electoral preference for allegedly ‘populist’ parties.⁹⁴ The capital features of pluralist anti-populism – its dismissal of nativism, anti-Semitism and romanticism – were simply adopted as apodictic truths regarding the eternal meaning of the term. A decisive majority of political scientists continued to rely on the analytical works of the American pluralists, exemplified by Lipset’s *Political Man* and Shils’ *Torment of Secrecy*, rarely asking themselves whether such anachronistic implantations were justifiable without strong methodological and empirical modifications.⁹⁵

In 1990, German historian Peter Fritzsche used the term ‘populist’ to describe the mobilisation tactics of German Nazism in his *Rehearsals for Fascism*.⁹⁶ In the same year, political scientist Hans-Georg Betz utilised the classificatory mechanisms offered by the pluralists to describe the rise of a new radical right in the aftermath of German re-unification. Relying on Lipset’s work on right-wing extremism and status politics, Betz saw in the ‘post-materialism’ of the German Greens and *Die Republikaner* a common ‘populistic’ sentiment.⁹⁷ Cementing a definitive linearity between German neo-fascism and populist politics in postmodern Europe, Betz’ work was of central importance to the steady denigration of the word within the German mediasphere. Expressions such as ‘populist’ *Globalisationsverlierer* and *Ressentimentspolitik* now became common currency within German political science and journalistic commentary, setting up a discursive tactic with which postmodern protest parties could be dismissed as irrational and vengeful. In 1992, Piero Ignazi introduced the notion into Italian debates, inaugurating a decade of

⁹³ See Taguieff, ‘Populisme’, p. 9.

⁹⁴ For the foremost statement of this view, see Hans-Georg Betz, *Radical Right Wing Populism* (London: MacMillan, 1994).

⁹⁵ See Urbinati, ‘Democracy’, pp. 114-115; Taggart, ‘Populism’, pp. 63-65; Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties*, pp. 36-39.

⁹⁶ See Peter Fritzsche, *Rehearsals for Fascism: Populism and Political Mobilization in Weimar Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Geoff Eley, ‘Conservatives—Radical Nationalists—Fascists: Calling the People into Politics, 1890–1930’, in John Abromeit (ed.), *Transformations of Populism in Europe and the Americas: History and Recent Tendencies*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), pp. 15–31.

⁹⁷ Hans-Georg Betz, ‘The Politics of Resentment: Right-Wing Radicalism in Germany’, in *Comparative Politics* 23 (October 1990), pp. 45-60; Hans-Georg Betz, *Postmodern Politics in Germany: The Politics of Resentment* (London: MacMillan, 1991); Hans-Georg Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994).

theorising Italian ‘telepopulism’.⁹⁸ Towards the middle of the 1990s, Austrian political scientists first mobilised the epithet ‘populist’ to describe the emerging Jörg Haider. Around 1991, with the electoral ascension of the Flemish Vlaams Blok in several Belgian cities, the word was now liberally applied to a party whose historical roots went back to nothing but post-war fascism.⁹⁹ In 2005, the year in which Ernesto Laclau first published his monograph, *On Populist Reason*, unprecedented scorn was heaped upon opponents of the Lisbon Treaty in the Dutch and French referendums.

As such, ‘small-p populism’ now became not merely an academic, but also an institutional source of odium for European elites and commentators. The analytic instrumentarium used by researchers to describe the rise of a contradictory political configuration arising in the European mainland yet differed little from the one deployed by pluralist predecessors in the 1950s. With the vocabulary of pluralist anti-populism now becoming common stock within the European academe, the Hofstadterian theses seemed to be in no further need of historical reconsideration. Although some researchers committed to waging basic conceptual clarification with regards to the dazzlingly complex notion of ‘populism’ were aware of a so-called ‘revisionist’ controversy that had agitated American academics in the 1950s, they did little to investigate the exact historical repercussions of the debate.¹⁰⁰ With its problematic pre-history in American academic contexts left wholly or, at least, substantially unexamined, a form of collective amnesia on behalf of European academics as to the genealogical origins of the vocabulary they were deploying seemed to reign supreme. As Christopher Husbands noted, the majority of contemporary populism scholarship thereby fell victim of a historical ‘recycling test’: it reproduced a long list of contested orthodoxies without wondering whether such analytic adaptations were possible without strong methodological backing.¹⁰¹ In the ever-expanding vocabulary of ‘post-materialism’, *Modernisierungsverlierer*, ‘telepopulism’, and ‘cultural politics’, the spectres of previous traditions continued to seethe under subterranean depths, riven with empirical and ideological contradictions. By and of itself, ‘small-p populism’ indeed became a European academic enigma of sorts, quite unlike the word Senator Overmyer had introduced into the global vocabulary in 1892.

Conclusion

This paper has inched towards a historiographical problematisation of certain analytical assumptions in contemporary European populism studies. In undertaking

⁹⁸ Piero Ignazi, ‘The Silent Counter-Revolution: Hypotheses on the Emergence of Extreme Right-Wing Parties in Europe’, in *EJPR* 22 (1992), pp. 3–34. For a later criticism, see Pierre Musso, ‘Le phénomène Berlusconi : ni populisme ni vidéocratie, mais néo-politique’, in *Hermès, La Revue* 42 (2005), pp. 172–180.

⁹⁹ See Jan Blommaert and Eric Corijn, *Populisme* (Antwerpen: Epo, 2004).

¹⁰⁰ For references to the debate in post-war European populism scholarship, see Müller, ‘Parsing Populism’, p. 83; Canovan, ‘People’, p. 319; Rooduijn, ‘The Nucleus’, p. 574; Mudde, ‘Populism’, p. 215; Deiwiks, ‘Populism’, p. 6; Lowndes, ‘Populism’, p. 157. A notable exception is Marco D’Eramo, ‘Populism and the New Oligarchy’, in *New Left Review* 82 (July–August 2013), pp. 5–7.

¹⁰¹ See Christopher Husbands, ‘How To Tame the Dragon, or What Comes Around Goes Around: A Critical Review of Some Major Contemporary Attempts to Account for Extreme-Right Racist Politics in Europe’, in Martin Schain (ed.), *Shadows Over Europe: The Development and Impact of the Extreme Right in Western Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 39–60.

this task, our genealogical suspicion may be said to have served a twofold aim. First, it has attempted to cast doubt on the originality of current academic uses of the term ‘populism’, and detect traces of unreflective sediments in contemporary scholarly uses of the word. Yet this problematisation of the term inevitably also aims at dispelling certain public understandings of the term ‘populism’ in contemporary public discourse, and seeks to enhance a more reflective attitude towards usages of the word in the political register at large. It has done so through arguing that a certain conceptualisation of populism deriving from American academic debates in the 1950s and 1960s – as synonymous with ‘status-anxiety’ and other pejorative connotations – has managed to reproduce itself across European academic disciplines and generations, thereby attaining the status of a conceptual *agent provocateur* destabilising the intellectual systems within which it has been absorbed.

As we have also attempted to show, the ideological and empirical deficits of the original sources of this widespread conceptualisation are far from being resolved, and its initial contradictions continue to bother contemporary populism research on both sides of the Atlantic. Highlighting such deficits might allow contemporary scholars take heed of the danger of deploying contemporary terms and vocabularies without precise intellectual provisos, and encourage a more reflective attitude towards some rather axiomatically held assumptions in contemporary political science, which, as it has been argued, might indeed merit a more refined intellectual reconsideration.¹⁰²

¹⁰² See Müller, ‘Parsing Populism’, p. 81.

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