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POPULIST RESSENTIMENT IN A MEDIATED CONTEXT

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Abstract: *The aim of this article is to review the role that emotions play in populism, specifically ressentiment, and how it is strategically used on social media platforms to create polarization. Firstly, I define the two of the main characteristics that populism has had over time: the agonistic struggle between a people and an elite, and charismatic leadership. Secondly, I examine the significance of resentment as a political emotion and how it operates in extreme right-wing populism. Thirdly, I review how resentment has been applied in the context of social media and how these platforms offer the most effective means to generate social mobilization based on emotions through storytelling, which can anticipate the reactions of the public or users.*

Keywords: *populism, social media, emotions, ressentiment, mobilization*

Introduction: populism as agonistic dynamic and charismatic leadership

Populism has emerged as one of the primary contemporary political phenomena. Consequently, there has been a significant increase in academic research on the subject, primarily aiming to elucidate the foundations and motivations of a phenomenon that proves difficult to delineate. There is a broad consensus that the concept of populism is inherently controversial[1]

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[1] Isaiah Berlin, "To Define Populism" in *Government and Opposition* no. 3(2), 1968, pp. 137-179; Ghita Ionescu & Ernest Gellner, *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics,* London: Macmillan, 1969; Margaret Canovan, *Populism*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981; Margaret Canovan, "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy" in *Political Studies*, no. 47 (1), pp. 2-16; Paul. A. Taggart, *Populism*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000; Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist" in *Government and opposition*, no. 39 (4), pp. 541-563; Sergiu Gherghina, Sergiu Mişcoiu & Sorina Soare (eds.), *Contemporary Populism: A*

given that it can be primarily regarded as an ideology, a strategy, a discourse, or a movement, among others. Populism can be understood as an ideology, which unlike traditional ideologies such as liberalism or socialism, lacks a thick core but rather exhibits a thin one characterized by dividing society into two homogeneous groups: the people versus the elites. It interprets politics as the expression of the general will of the people. However, it can also be understood as a spontaneous and fragmented movement capable of harnessing political discontent to create mobilization and support for specific causes. Additionally, it can be conceived from the perspective of discourse as a generator of performative acts that are particularly effective in mediated contexts.[2]

One of the central features on which scholars of populism generally concur is that the notion of the "people" is a structural idea present in various conceptualizations. This idea of the people can be understood as an anti-elitism that entails a logic of people-elite or us-them, leading populism to employ a concept of politics akin to that of Carl Schmitt.[3] According to the German jurist, the political is defined by the intensive and relational conflict between friend and enemy, where any issue could potentially engender this dynamic. For Schmitt, antagonism represents conflict at its utmost intensity, wherein the enemy poses an existential risk, and the conflict must be resolved by those directly involved, thus leaving no doubt about the unity among friends.

In addition to the agonistic dynamic, the notion of the "people" implies an anti-liberalism or a pure community in which there is no pluralism.[4] Representative democracy is rejected in favour of advocating for an "authentic" or direct democracy. This is the sense in which Ernesto Laclau[5] argues that populism represents the most purely democratic form of political action, in the original Greek sense of the term as the power of the people, which allows for the incorporation of demands from excluded sectors.

Controversial Concept and Its Diverse Forms, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013; Benjamin Moffit, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016; Cas Mudde & Cristobal R. Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

[2] Moffit, *op. cit*.

[3] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political: Expanded Edition,* Chicago: Univeristy of Chicago Press, 2017 [1927].

[4] Paul. A. Taggart, *Populism*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000.

[5] Ernesto Laclau, *La razón populista*, Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2005.

The way such demands are typically channelled is through charismatic leadership. In this regard, as asserted by Mudde & Kaltwasser,[6] populism owes much to the conceptualization put forth by Max Weber. Charismatic leadership refers to the legitimacy bestowed upon a politician because their charisma is associated with heroic qualities capable of prevailing in times of crisis. This type of leadership has been highly successful in populism as a source of authority alternative to institutionalist leaders.

In this context, emotions, though not unique to populism—as other ideologies, such as liberalism with its appeal to freedom or socialism with its emphasis on equality, have also relied on them—are central in the repertoire of populist actions. Primarily, these actions are based on polarization and provocation, leveraging emotions such as fear, hatred, or resentment that are defined and mobilized in opposition to their adversaries. Subsequently, an examination will be conducted on one of the primary negative emotions, resentment, which numerous authors agree constitutes a significant component of mobilizing discourse. This will be exemplified by an analysis of Donald Trump's inaugural address. This speech will be analysed because it is a paradigmatic example that encapsulates the main characteristics of populist theory. Additionally, it will provide a better understanding of the theorization of resentment, as explained by Wendy Brown, who also focuses on Trump's average supporters.

Populist political emotions: ressentiment and the case of Trump's inaugural address

Arias Maldonado[7] highlights that the primary characteristics of populist affectivity include, firstly, a rejection of rationalism as the foundation of social order. While traditionally, ideologies have been grounded in rational-transcendent ideas serving as social bonds, such as freedom or equality, populism's bond is purportedly based on the emotional connection the people have with a leader and their animosity towards adversaries. This entails two consequences: firstly, pluralism is inherently rejected since it is understood that the people cannot be divided but must remain united,

[6] Mudde & Kaltwasser, *op. cit.,* p. 66.

[7] Manuel A. Maldonado, "Las bases afectivas del populismo" in *Revista internacional de pensamiento político* no. 12, 2017, pp. 151-167.

facilitating the forging of bonds transcending socioeconomic boundaries. Secondly, the multitude takes precedence over the individual citizen.

The sentiments with which populism operates are largely negative, often stemming from situations such as economic crises, which are then appropriated and transformed into something positive. According to Laclau's theory, these are the empty signifiers that populist leaders seize upon, crafting a discourse capable of offering an alternative to the previously hegemonic order.

Politics is understood as conflict rather than consensus. Departing from agonism and the struggle between the people and the elites, populism abandons the principles of liberal democracy, where established norms are realized through rational agreement among actors with different interests. Thus, while populism does not reject democracy *per se* but rather liberal democracy, it contends that what is instituted can only be achieved through agonistic struggle between adversaries. The construction of agonism "relies on a set of psychological and affective mechanisms that refer to the deficits of rationality of the political subject [because] it does not matter how the content of each of these two opposing entities is defined in each case".[8] In this sense, belonging to a group is understood as an emotional need rooted in evolution, and Maldonado asserts that "it would not be unreasonable to claim that populism is a political style whose operative assumption is moral tribalism".[9]

Another important aspect, though not unique to populism, is the significance of storytelling in constructing the belonging or identity of the people. This is particularly amplified in the post-factual and digital context where narrative or storytelling are the most effective tools for shaping political loyalty. The narrative frequently employed by populism is one in which the aim is to "regain power in order to redress the injustices suffered by [the people]".[10]

An example showcasing these affective characteristics is Donald Trump's inaugural address in 2017, where he asserts that the spirit of the American nation is in decline because in recent years, an elite in Washington D.C. has solely pursued its own interests and enriched itself at the expense of the citizens. Trump positions himself as a kind of saviour whose objective

[8] *Ibidem,* p. 157.
[9] *Ibidem,* p. 158.
[10] *Ibidem, loc. cit*.

is to return political power to the people, who, while the elite celebrated and enriched themselves, have become impoverished. In this manner, Trump creates a "them" - the elite that has forgotten about the citizens - and an "us" that represents the spirit and true values of American citizenship. Trump includes himself in the latter group and asserts that during his presidency, all decisions will truly be made exclusively for the citizens. In this regard, with the slogan "Make America Great Again," Trump appeals to the working class and the middle class that has been impoverished over the last decade as a consequence of the economic crisis. This dissatisfaction and disillusionment with institutions and politics in general have been channelled by appealing to an affective sentiment aimed at reclaiming an idealized past that has been stolen by "them."

Furthermore, the external sphere is deemed less important because it is asserted that in recent times, others have been defended, and the United States has forgotten to defend itself, contributing to the country's decline. Trump proposes that the country focus on itself and that production neither come from nor be directed towards the outside, but solely towards itself, thereby producing and consuming only products made in the United States by American citizens. While foreign relations continue to hold some importance, the paramount focus is on national interests themselves.

When discussing the people and the "us," Trump maintains that, in a certain sense, the United States is the true chosen people, protected by the Grace of God. Thus, what truly strengthens and justifies the superiority of the "us" is the sympathy and protection of something superior to political affairs, which is God. And Trump, unlike politicians who had done nothing up to that point, is the man of action, the leader capable of reclaiming the spirit of the United States.

This discourse reveals that populism also focuses on the future, and using affective language, it seeks to justify the existence of a true and righteous people, while simultaneously rejecting traditional politics, albeit utilizing its own means.

Ressentiment is one of the primaries affects present in populist dynamics. Nietzsche, in the chapter, *On the Bestowing Virtue,* of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,[11] contrasts two types of egoism: one unhealthy, characteristic of

[11] Friedich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006 [1883].

the resentful person or the miser who seeks not personal growth but rather to accumulate more wealth and position oneself above others, and another healthy egoism where one becomes a gift for others without expecting anything in return. In the second, the individual commits themselves and reifies in actions they consider inherently good, irrespective of others' opinions and without feeling the world owes them. The unhealthy egoist is chained to the prevailing values of the moment, whereas the healthy egoist revalues those values, creating new forms of valuation, thereby expanding the moral and political realm.[12]

In one of her recent works, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Anti-Democratic Politics in the West*,[13] political theorist Wendy Brown examines this same phenomenon within the context of neoliberal rationality and the support for populist parties and leaders. Brown delves into contemporary nihilism and its backing of right-wing populism by "white men" who have witnessed their beliefs and way of life crumbling in just a few years. She contends that contemporary nihilism has "desublimated" values, meaning it has freed them from energies, rendering them as mere interchangeable commodities.[14] In the contemporary world, all values are trivial and superficial, devoid of their content. This leads people to be unable to distinguish truth from falsehood, to form their own opinions, thereby becoming incapable of defending themselves against fake news. The release of energy signifies the atrophy of human capacities, neutralization, and loss of consciousness. Brown argues that "Desublimation sends the will to power outward again as it releases the subject from the lash and restraint of conscience".[15] The result is not so much nihilism, but rather the inability to

[12] Didier Fassin makes a distinction between *Resentment* and *Ressentiment*; however, as he asserts, this is a distinction of ideal types, and in political practice, both can be indistinguishable. Resentment is a psychological reaction to pain inflicted by another agent, and the aim of resentment is solely to make the other aware of the inflicted harm. Meanwhile, for Nietzsche in *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), ressentiment is the origin of morality from which good and evil are configured. In this article, both terms are used indistinctly. The guiding definition of *resentment*/*ressentiment* follows the interpretation provided by Deleuze in his *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, namely, ressentiment as a reactive affect that diminishes the power to act, in opposition to positive affects that are active and generate powers to act.

[13] Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Anti-Democratic Politics in the West*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.

[14] *Ibidem,* p. 161.

[15] *Ibidem,* p. 164.

nihilism, as individuals cannot conform to values with which to construct a positive project that transcends the agonistic dynamics of the moment.

Brown argues that one of the main reasons why democracies have eroded in the present day is due to this liberation of values, which has ultimately led, especially in the case of individuals who support extreme right-wing alternatives, to a politics based on resentment. The resentment and rage have not been channelled into other moral values with which to reconfigure the world but have remained as mere resentment and rage.[16] This results in politics not needing to be moral, but rather an expression of cries for vengeance, with no outlet or future.[17] This is evident in the case of Trump, where his political strategy, like that of his supporters, is driven by anger stemming from the void left behind by the loss of traditional values that have been believed to be immutable for centuries.

Éric Fassin[18] suggests that resentment is not solely a matter of globalization's losers, as is often thought, but rather a consequence of those who have traditionally been considered inferior, such as women and minorities, experiencing improved conditions. "Right-wing populism detests nothing so much as the undeserving poor, those poor who deserve no more than what they have, or rather, who do not even deserve that".[19] In this sense, both Brown and Fassin concur that the resentment seen in right-wing populism corresponds to the unhealthy egoism described by Nietzsche, as Fassin asserts, the idea being that "others are enjoying in my place; if I am not enjoying, it's their fault. And that very resentment turns into pleasure".[20]

Pierre Rosanvallon[21] divides this phenomenon into three different emotions. Firstly, there are the emotions of position, which express a "democratic resentment," such as the anger of not being recognized, being abandoned, or not being taken into account by the elites in power. Secondly, there are the emotions of intellection, arising from the inability to distinguish between truth and falsehood, ultimately promoting misinformation and conspiracy theories. Rosanvallon asserts that these conspiracy theories aim

[16] *Ibidem,* p. 177.
[17] *Ibidem,* p. 178.
[18] Eric Fassin, *Populisme: le grand ressentiment*, Paris: Éditions Textuel, 2017.
[19] *Ibidem,* p. 36.
[20] *Ibidem,* p. 39.
[21] Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le siècle du populisme. Histoire, théorie, critique*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2020.

to demonstrate that behind the apparent opacity and complexity of the real political or economic world lies an order of power that is perfectly simple and rational. The solution proposed is that the groups supporting these theories consider themselves responsible for embracing and becoming active propagandists. Thirdly, Rosanvallon identifies emotions of intervention, rooted in a negative politics where intensive conflict is notably present, with the aim being nothing other than removal. However, this does not lead to the constitution of a force capable of reinventing the world. Instead, it results in a refusal of responsibility, as well as avoiding responding to criticism or the task of arguing.

Populism in a digital context: What impact does digital ressentiment have?

Populism in the digital context generates considerable debate and attention because it is rooted in a language of hate and resentment, as outlined above. However, it is not clear to what extent it has enough influence to also affect institutions. The emergence of parties with populist tendencies is not an exclusive phenomenon of contemporary politics, as they began to emerge in the post-war period. Nevertheless, it is in the 21st century when they have gained more prominence in an increasing number of countries and become one of the most significant actors in the political landscape. Moreover, compared to traditional and institutional political parties, they have been characterized by their excellent management of new technologies, particularly social media.

In populist mobilisation within the digital realm, the predominant dynamic continues to be one of emotional language based on negative emotions rather than constructive arguments. The characteristic feature of social media is that they offer the possibility of a relationship perceived as unmediated between the leader and their followers, while other institutionalised political actors may not utilise this tool to incite mobilisation.

Benjamin Krämer[22] asserts that the relationship between populist actors and the media can take various forms. Firstly, populism may utilise digital media as a vehicle to generate communication for users that journalism or other platforms may not be capable of providing. In this sense, once again, this communication oriented towards an audience is often

[22] Benjamin Krämer, "Populism, Media, and the Form of Society" in *Communication Theory*, no. 28 (4), pp. 444-465.

intended to fill an empty signifier present in a specific context, which populist actors intercept. Secondly, according to Krämer, the media can sometimes create populist forms of entertainment that complement or compete with populist actors, such as certain television or radio programs. Thirdly, populist groups and parts of the citizenry may view mainstream media as part of a conspiratorial elite. Krämer considers this latter form, non-populist media, as particularly relevant because it allows for the generation of a populist dynamic; by lacking agency over such media and the citizenry feeling disconnected from them, it may foster a belief that they are governed or have conspiratorial interests.

Kissas[23] examines how charismatic individual leaders, particularly in the digital context, are the ones who triumph and garner support, rather than a political party or organization. He understands populism as a performative ideology that does not solely depend on economic inequality, but primarily aims to affect subjectivity to act on reality[24] He asserts that "In the aesthetic realm of performativity, ressentiment functions as the glue between Trump's personality and his candidate profile, authentically collapsing them both into the defiant persona".[25] In this regard, as Higgins[26] points out, Trump maintained a distinction between his institutional Twitter account (@POTUS) and his personal account (@RealDonaldTrump) after his victory and throughout his presidency. Although he also used the former differently compared to previous presidents, it was on his personal account where he continued to distinguish himself using spontaneity and the anti-political expressionism characteristic of his pre-electoral period.

Social movements, particularly populism, whether left-wing or right-wing, have better understood the significance of social media compared to other political actors. However, another issue to consider is whether the very design of the software application is constituted by norms that benefit such forms of political mobilisation because "the design of a software application is already the design of an organization, proposing a model of relationship

[23] Angelos Kissas, "Performative and Ideological Populism: The Case of Charismatic Leaders on Twitter" in *Discourse & Society*, no. 31 (3), 2020, pp. 268-284.
[24] *Ibidem,* p. 271.
[25] *Ibidem,* p. 275.
[26] Michael Higgins, "Mediated Populism, Culture and Media Form" in *Palgrave Communications*, no. 2 (1), 2017, pp. 1-5.

and interaction".[27] Martínez Gómez's hypothesis is that there is mutual feedback between the social movement and the structure of the software application, ultimately benefiting both. Both populism and social media propose a model of organization, the former being spontaneous and the latter more structured but equally immediate, thus their convergence becomes a process. The immediacy of social media perfectly complements the spontaneity of populist demands, and although their impact may seem coincidental at first glance, it is actually based on such structuring that anticipates their media success.

As Papacharissi[28] argues, information, particularly Big Data, is creating a new form of knowledge and communication grounded in "digital orality" rather than in writing. The vast amount of information that Big Data can gather, representing a revolution compared to all traditional archiving methods, allows for the generation of knowledge based solely on information, which can affect the emotions of citizens. Through this information, digital orality can be generated, allowing for storytelling that gives rise to situated knowledge,[29] narratives that oppose given epistemologies and based on information, can anticipate the affective responses of the public or users.

Mitchell Dean[30] asserts that social media can be understood in the form of acclamation. Acclamation "in its classical form as a public rite with both oral and gestural performative elements".[31] It produces affective exclamations of triumph, disapproval, contempt, etc. In its simplest form, acclamation it is a collective form of consent. What is distinctive is that acclamation is an institution in the sense that it does not require its participants to have a prior idea of its meaning; it does not require prior work or individual experience to perform it. The consequence is that through acclamation, what is expressed is collective affect rather than individual affect, as one participates in a public ritual rather than seeking a way to express individual emotions.

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[27] Luis A. M. Gómez, "Imagen, an-alfabetismo, políticas del evento", in Sara Rebollo Bueno, Cristina Pérez de Algaba & Luis M. F. Martínez (eds.), *Género y educación ante la manipulación de la comunicación*, Madrid, 2023, p. 881.

[28] Zizi Papacharissi, "The Unbearable Lightness of Information and the Impossible Gravitas of Knowledge: Big Data and the Makings of a Digital Orality" in *Media, Culture & Society*, no. 37 (7), 2015, pp. 1-6.

[29] *Ibidem*, p. 6.

[30] Mitchell Dean, "Political Acclamation, Social Media and the Public Mood" in *European Journal of Social Theory*, no. 20 (3), 2017, pp. 417-434.

[31] *Ibidem*, p. 421.

Social media have played a decisive role as facilitators of the ritual of public acclamation because they have made the physical presence of the people almost unnecessary. However, this has also configured unique characteristics. Firstly, they are characterized by greatly reducing complexity, as they reduce acclamation to gestures such as likes or follows, which serve to approve or disapprove. Secondly, although acclamation may occur in the private sphere, a large hub of connection is established where individuals encounter and merge with others, whether they desire it or not. Thirdly, it is guided by the logic of popularity, indicating a transition from a culture of participation to a culture of connectivity. This allows for reflection on the meaning of orality itself because orality, gesture, and affect in front of a physical audience are not the same as in front of a virtual audience. In the latter, even though there may be an infinity of connected users, there is not necessarily a unified audience. Thus, digital acclamation ultimately becomes a social practice that occurs in a completely privatized space, a promise of public action that is heavily controlled.

Ultimately, there are different interpretations regarding whether populism in the virtual context does or does not exert a notable influence on institutions or political regimes. As seen, some authors argue that digital polarization does indeed affect and degrade public institutions, especially liberal representative democracies, while others assert that virtual mobilizations are structured in such a way that, although they may have immense influence within them, they are not relevant outside of them. In any case, answers to this dilemma have already begun to be proposed. One of them comes from Freedman,[32] who suggests the creation of public policies that reconstruct digital media in such a way that they can contain the expansion and support of extreme right-wing populism.

Conclusions

Populism is not a new political phenomenon, although it has been over the last decade that it has been gaining increasing importance in numerous parts of the world. This rise in importance has gone hand in hand with the growing use of the internet and social media. Although they may not necessarily be correlated, as seen, populist social movements and their

[32] Des Freedman, "Populism and Media Policy Failure" in *European Journal of Communication*, no. 33 (6), 2018, pp. 604-618.

leaders have been the political actors who best understood how to interpret the digital context to generate mobilization based on emotions.

This may be because information and Big Data produce a new form of knowledge that favours digital orality. While traditionally politics has been based on values or beliefs that, even if they were those of a political community, could be seen as distant, populism and digital orality can affect values that are close to individuals, thus mobilizing them effectively. Nevertheless, although populism has taken advantage of this in recent years, it does not imply that this way of doing politics cannot be institutionalized and therefore lose the privilege over public attention that populism has enjoyed. These possible forms of institutionalization have not been addressed here because they exceed the scope of this work. As Norris & Inglehart[33] argue, on the one hand, the economic inequalities generated by neoliberalism and globalization since around the 1980s may have contributed to populist support; however, fundamentally, there are also a set of interdependent deeper cultural phenomena.

This article has aimed to demonstrate the relationship between populist theory and its application on social media. It has been observed that social media is a platform where populist performativity is rewarded. This can pave the way for future studies where political science is linked with disciplines such as neuroscience to study the role of emotions more deeply on social media and how they can be controlled. If this is feasible, it could also open the possibility for populism to lose the primacy it has held on social media to date, or for other movements to necessarily adopt a populist approach in order to achieve prominence on social media.

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